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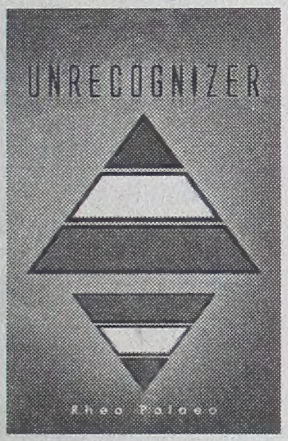

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EDITORIAL

Sheila Williams

REMEMBERING FREDERIK POHL

Daily visits to *SFsignal.com* keep me up on our field's latest news. Checking in on my phone on the last day of LoneStarCon 3—this year's Worldcon—I discovered that Frederik Pohl had died. Although I knew he was ninety-three and had been in failing health, I was shocked and saddened by the news.

Fred Pohl, author, editor, even agent, blogger, and SF ambassador to almost every corner of the world, helped fashion the field as we know it. Rather than try to capture his whole life, I thought I would reflect on this talented grandmaster from my own point of view as an editor.

Long before there was a Hugo Award, Fred edited the 1940 and most of the 1941 issues of two pulp magazines—*Astonishing Stories* and *Super Science Stories*. Authors whose first stories appeared in these issues included Isaac Asimov, James Blish, and Wilson Tucker. Although Fred was operating with an excruciatingly low budget, he was also able to procure work from L. Sprague de Camp, Robert Heinlein, Henry Kuttner, and other well-known writers. Fred worked on some later issues as assistant editor before enlisting in the army in 1943.

He returned to editing magazines at the helm of *If* and *Galaxy* in 1959. During his tenure, *If* won three Hugos for Best Professional Magazine. Works published under Fred's tutelage included Larry Niven's "Neutron Star," Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream," Cordwainer Smith's "The Ballad of Lost C'mell," and Roger Zelazny's "Damnation Alley." He published numerous pieces by Poul Anderson and Robert Silverberg as well as Gardner Dozois and Bruce McAllister's first stories and Gene Wolfe's second published tale.

Harlan Ellison has said that Fred "remains one of the truest judges of writing ability the field of imaginative literature has ever produced." In his book, *Transformations: The Story of Science Fiction Magazines from 1950 to 1970,* Mike Ashley adds, "that ability, along with his perspicacity and tenacity [allowed Pohl] to shepherd his magazines through the wilderness of the early sixties and make them among the most exciting and rewarding publications of their day."

The seventies found this man of many hats busily editing brilliant novels for Bantam (Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* both came out in 1975), as well as producing his own award winning books—the 1976 Nebula award winner *Man Plus,* the 1977 Hugo and Nebula winner *Gateway* and 1979's National Book Award winner *Jem*. He also managed to be supportive of a fledgling publication then-called *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.* Three of his tales appeared in 1979 issues of *Asimov's*. Although there are some gaps, Fred averaged roughly a story a year in *Asimov's* from 1979 through 1994. These include the March 1979 Nebula finalist "Mars Masked" and January 1985's Hugo award winner "Fermi and Frost."

Perhaps because of his renown, very little bio information accompanies these stories. The few that carry interesting tidbits mention his wife, "the least stern of professors, Betty Ann Hull," his devotion to the internationalization of SF, and his apprehension about humanity's future. The introduction to "Fermi and Frost" stresses his concern about nuclear winter; the intro to the November 1986 story, "Iriadeska's Martians" mentions that Fred "has represented the U.S. State Department in such diverse countries as Singapore, the Soviet Union, and New Zealand, and he has attended international conferences in far flung places like the People's Republic of China, Brazil, and Yugoslavia." The intro to Fred's 1992 story, "The Martians," says that, "Mr. Pohl's latest book, *Our Angry Earth* [written in collaboration with Isaac Asimov], is a nonfiction work about the dam-

age we're doing to our environment, and the consequences and remedies thereof."

I never knew Fred very well, but I always felt connected to him. In 2002, when I was pregnant with my younger daughter, I was suddenly hospitalized for a suspected blood clot. I was cross. The situation had upended my routine. I had a very frightened eight-year-old at home and I was on the phone with my assistant figuring out how deadlines were going to be met when a hospital chaplain showed up at my bedside. I'm not religious and I wasn't thrilled, but somehow the good angel on one of my shoulders decked the little devil on the other. Rather than coldly turning her away, I decided to engage the chaplain in conversation.

She was astonished to learn that I managed an SF magazine. Before she'd become a minister, she told me she'd once worked as an editorial assistant for Fred at *Galaxy* and *If*. This news lightened my mood. I took it as a good omen and was unsurprised when test results later showed that I was fine. Although I didn't catch her name and Fred and I never did figure out who she was, it seemed obvious to me that there is a secret cabal of SF editors who look out for their own.

Fred sent me a new story a few months after I became editor of *Asimov's*. As always, it was a pleasure to work with him. "Generations" appeared in the September 2005 issue. It was his first story for us in more than ten years. The accompanying intro says, "Frederik Pohl's current principal activity is traveling around the world as much as possible—he visited his seventh (and last, because that's all there are) continent in 2004, and hopes to get to his fifty-first and fifty-second countries in 2006—but he keeps on writing when he can find the time. His short story collection, *Platinum Pohl,* out this year from Tor, is his one hundred and thirty-fifth book." Fred kept on traveling, but, alas, this was his final story for *Asimov's*.

Late in the evening on the last day of LoneStarCon 3, I met Gardner Dozois, Kim Stanley Robinson, Susan Casper, Tor editor Beth Meacham, and others in our hotel bar. We all lifted our glasses in salute to the life and legacy of the multifaceted Frederik Pohl. ❍

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REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

REREADING PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

There had been rumblings all through the spring of 1952 that *Startling Stories* was going to publish something special that summer, a truly startling story indeed, a taboo-smashing novella by a brilliant newcomer named Philip José Farmer. *Startling Stories* had emerged in the previous few years as one of the leading SF publications, having transformed itself from the juvenile action-adventure magazine of the wartime years into a serious contender for the top rank. Its special feature was a policy of running a lengthy lead novella—thirty-five thousand to sixty thousand words—complete in each monthly issue. I was a teenage fan at the time, yearning for a career as a science fiction writer; I read all the magazines, I studied the news of the field intently, I kept alert for all the latest trends. Oh, yes, the advance word about this man Farmer and his game-changing novella caught my attention. It certainly did.

The first hint of something special ahead came in the April 1952 issue, when *Startling's* editor Samuel Mines called for greater sexual frankness in science fiction. Not for "exploitation," Mines pointed out. He would never ask a writer to "put some sex" into a story. But "if his story deals with people of different sexes, and they get themselves into a spot where a certain amount of sex interest is likely to spark between them, we see no reason why that should not be admitted. . . . There's the beginning of a policy for our science fiction. Let's print stories about people as real as our authors can make them. Let's deal honestly with their problems, their characters, and motives—and be limited only by good taste."

Modern readers, accustomed to graphic sex scenes and four-letter words in fiction, can have no idea how radical this statement of policy was in 1952. Federal laws prohibited the distribution of such strongly erotic works as D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the novels of Henry Miller, and a brief upsurge of "spicy" pulp magazines in the 1930s had led to a program of official suppression that left all American magazines that published fiction as clean as *Peter Rabbit*. What, then, was Sam Mines leading up to here?

The June 1952 *Startling* gave us the answer: "We have just bought a story which came in cold—unheralded, unsung, unagented. It is called *The Lovers*, by a name new to science fiction, Philip José Farmer, but it is a story, we think, which begins the career of a fine new talent. It is fresh, vital, shocking. [illegible]tched with acid. Your reaction to it is apt to be violent, one way or another."

I couldn't wait. And didn't. When the August 1952 issue of *Startling* that featured "The Lovers" appeared, I began reading it at once. And read on and on, awed, overwhelmed, even, by the vigor of its prose, the ingenuity and inventiveness of its concepts, the headlong energy of Farmer's storytelling, and—yes—the unabashed frankness of the erotic content.

And now, after sixty years, I've reread Farmer's pathbreaking story—the original magazine novella, not the novel that he made out of it long afterward. I was afraid it wouldn't stand up to my youthful memories of it. But it did. It certainly did. It's not subtly or smoothly written, something I may not have been capable of noticing in 1952. But why should it have been? Farmer was a novice then, a brilliant novice but a novice nevertheless. And throughout his long, distin-

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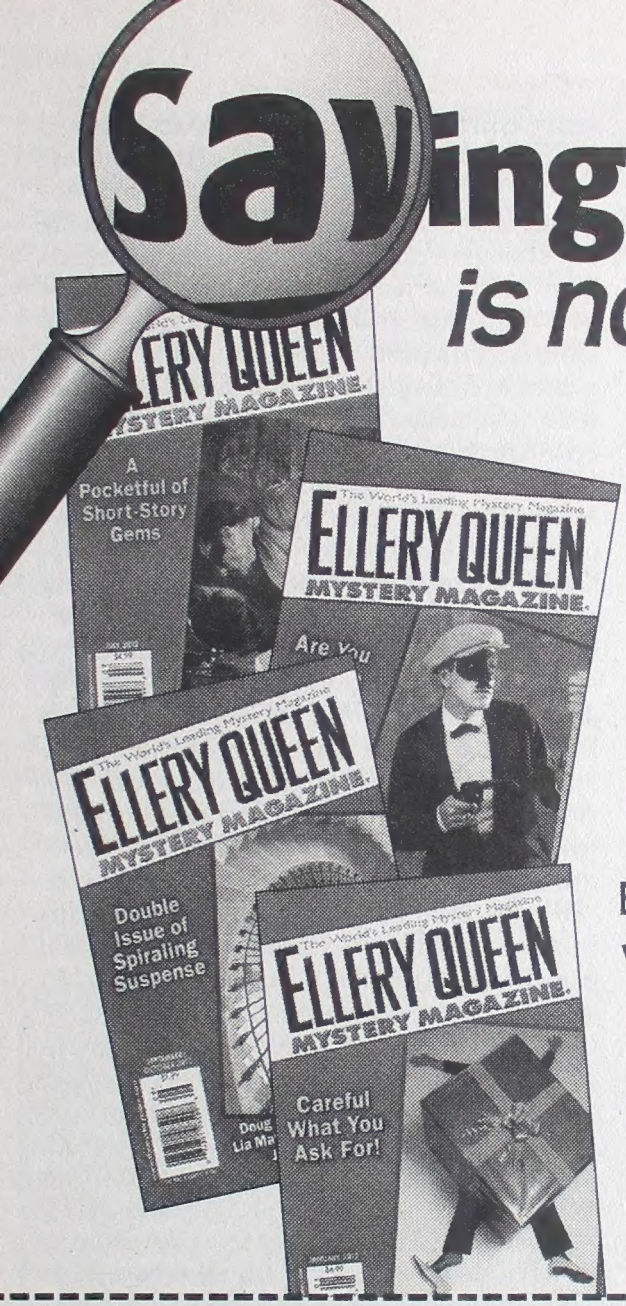

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guished career he never hesitated to push his way headlong through a scene that he needed in order to establish a plot point or a chunk of world-building background, even if it brought forth some fairly awkward prose. So the novella is a bit awkward. It's also quite astonishing. This time around I found it exceedingly hard to believe that it was a beginner's work.

Farmer drops us down in a strangely altered future universe where Israel and a Bantu-Malay federation seem to be the major powers on Earth. Everybody else seems subject to a fiercely puritanical new religious cult that is pushing humanity out into the stars to conquer and convert the natives of all inhabited worlds, of which there are a multitude. A little of this background material he tells us straightforwardly, in expository chunks, but he leaves most of it for us to pick up as best we can as we go along. It's a story marked by remarkable intellectual generosity: the amazing abundance of invented speculative material, held in back-story reserve and gradually released to the reader with unusual skill for a new writer, makes "The Lovers" a rich feast for readers who admire the workings of a cunning extrapolative mind.

To find out why so much of the back-story is kept from the reader, I dug out a 1953 essay Farmer wrote for a little magazine called *Fantastic Worlds* and discovered that the original manuscript had been much longer—too long for *Galaxy,* the leading magazine of the day (and the top-paying one), which Farmer hoped would publish it. "So I cut hell out of it," he wrote. About a third of the story ended up on the cutting-room floor. And so what remained of it is unusually sophisticated in technique, a dazzling demonstration of Robert A. Heinlein's path-breaking practice of letting background information in a story be revealed by action rather than by exposition. It might not have seemed so sophisticated had Farmer not felt impelled to slice his novella down to fit a magazine's arbitrary thirty thousand-word space limit.

But *Galaxy,* though it prided itself on its indifference to taboos, rejected the story anyway. Had the sexual content been too strong even for *Galaxy's* editor Horace Gold? No, as it turned out. Farmer himself explains, in that 1953 article, that Gold had no problem with the sex, but objected to Farmer's use of a dictatorial far-future society that had developed as an outgrowth of Judaism. "Whatever my attitude toward minorities might be," Farmer wrote, "the story itself was dangerous [in Gold's view]. It, in effect, justified discrimination because minorities *might,* if they ever achieved domination, become dictatorial." Gold had wanted the story rewritten to eliminate the link to Judaism. Farmer found Gold's objection far-fetched, and he balked at another suggestion of Gold that he move the setting of the story to Earth, thus eliminating the carefully delineated alien background Farmer had so lovingly invented. "To carry that out would have meant wiping out Ozagen, Fobo, the tavern beetles, etc.," said Farmer. "I wasn't a world-wrecker. I couldn't do it." He thanked Gold for his input, sent the story in its cut-down form to Sam Mines of *Startling,* and his career was launched. As for all the background material he had slashed, it wound up in the lengthy sequel to "The Lovers," "Moth and Rust," which *Startling* published the following year, a much less successful work that has been reprinted now and then under such titles as *A Woman a Day* and *Timestop.*

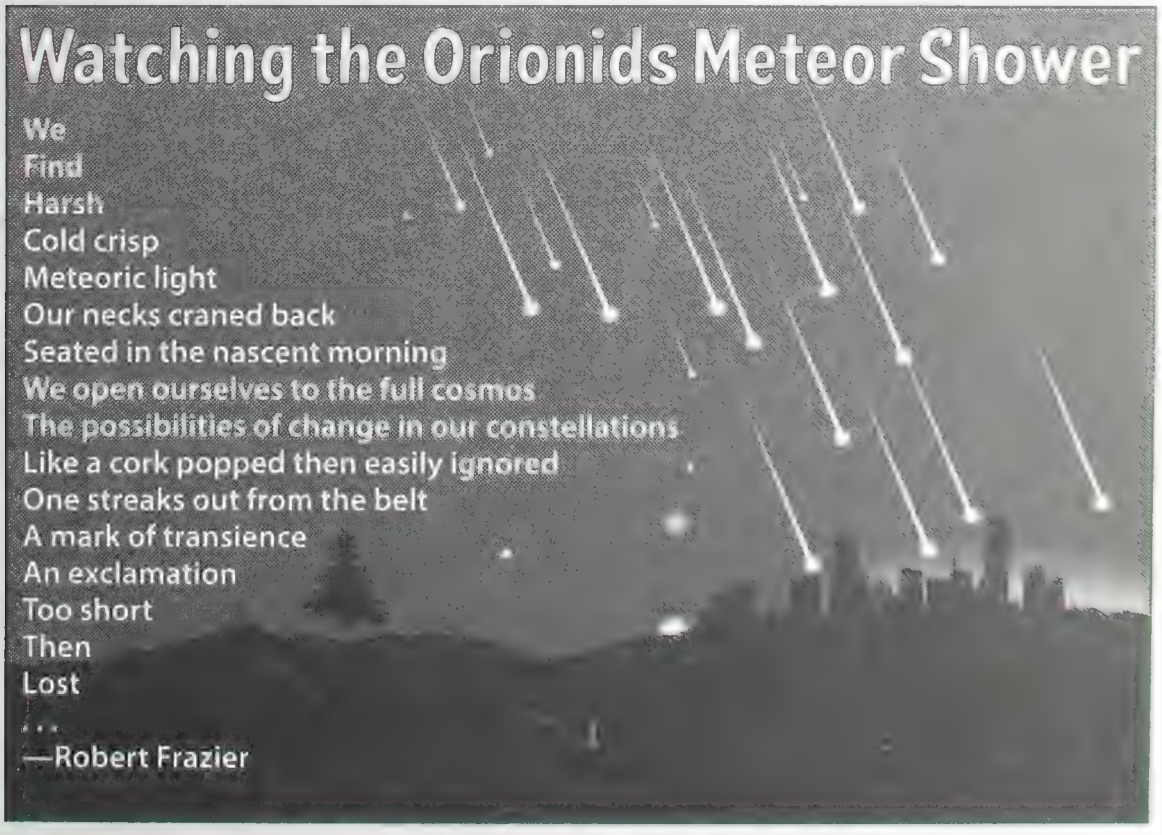
"The Lovers" is a whale of a story, a very special kind of love story, a trailblazer, a pioneering work. That was how I found it in 1952, and how it still seems to me more than sixty years later. It's sexy, yes, and certainly that caught my teenage interest back there in 1952, but it's the *way* the story is sexy that matters most.

It's not just a tale of "people of different sexes" who had generated "a certain amount of sex interest between them," as Sam Mines put it in his editorial. The "sex interest" involves a human man and

an alien woman, a form of miscegenation that was astonishingly daring in an era when state and federal legislation still governed who could go to bed with whom. And Farmer's description of the sex act is something that never before had been seen in the pages of a science fiction magazine. "She insisted on keeping her eyes open, even during the climax," we are told. *Climax?* Very clinical talk indeed; such sex as there had been in the spiciest of the old pulps had been nothing more than an embrace and a line of asterisks. The boldest of the SF writers of the 1950s—Fritz Leiber, Theodore Sturgeon—had approached Farmer's degree of sexual frankness, but had never quite reached it at that time.

Farmer had an even bigger surprise in store. She keeps her eyes open in that big moment not merely to provide Farmer's readers with a bit of titillating detail, but because Farmer has worked out a perfect *science fiction* rationale for keeping her eyes open—and when he comes to his explanation of it, he uses words like "intercourse" and "orgasm" that surely had never been seen in the pages of a science fiction magazine before. I can't possibly communicate the impact that those words had for the SF readers of 1952. And, just as Mines had promised, the sexual content of the story is in no way exploitative: everything that happens between Farmer's two protagonists had a rationale splendidly grounded in speculative biology, a magnificent science fiction invention. When it ends, it ends tragically, and the tragedy too is not extrinsic to the plot but grows organically out of Farmer's startling SF premise.

Quite a story, yes. It earned Farmer a Hugo in 1953—the year that the first Hugo awards were given out—as Best New Writer, which is certainly what he was, even against the tough competition (Philip K. Dick, Robert Sheckley, Algis Budrys, and more) that that boom-time year provided. The science fiction field was never the same after "The Lovers." With his very first story Philip José Farmer had launched a revolution. ↄ



SCHOOLS OF CLAY

Derek Künsken

Derek Künsken has built genetically engineered viruses; worked with street children in Latin America; served as a Canadian diplomat; and, most importantly, taught his eight-year old son about super-heroes and science. Derek writes science fiction and fantasy in Ottawa, Canada, and can be found at *www.derekkunsken.com*. "Schools of Clay" grew from musings about how a species' life cycle might evolve to incorporate time travel and how selection pressures would act upon that cycle.

Present

The workers' revolution began on the hive's nine hundred and third day, when the Hero pulsar was above the horizon to the north. A pod of predatory shaghāl emerged from behind a small asteroid to the west. The exhaust of their thrust was shielded by their bodies, but the point shines of their souls were visible to those in the colony who had souls. The shine was just slightly blue-shifting.

The skates were not ready. Only half the princesses were fueled in the launch tubes of the hive. Indecision washed over the colony. Skates and souls yelled over each other. Then, a thousand tiny reactions bloomed. The colony panicked. The flat, triangular skates hopped along the regolith in different directions on steely fingers.

Diviya stood above the rising dust, on a mound of mine tailings. He had been meeting with a half-dozen revolutionaries in the slums past the worker shanties. None of his revolutionaries possessed souls, so they could not see the shaghāl, but the panicked radio bursts from the hive alarmed them. Some thought that a squad of hive drones had found them.

"Oh no," Diviya said.

"Flee!" Diviya's soul crackled to him in the radio static. "Save the princesses!"

"Diviya, the revolution isn't ready!" Tejas said. Tejas was a soulless worker, made of carbon-reinforced ceramic. He was triangular and flat, with a single, lightly abraded lens on the vertex of the leading edges of his wide fins. "The workers are not assembled."

Hours away yet, the shaghāl split into two pods. The first pod of predators continued toward the hive. The second angled to intercept the migration, before it had even launched.

"The whole colony is already late," Diviya said. "The revolution must happen now."

Nearby, three skates hopped between the dusty mounds of mine tailings toward

the hive. Their radioactive souls shone hot behind their eyes: tax farmers, coming from the farms to join the migration.

"We have only minutes," Diviya said in a radio discharge. He felt sick with doubt. He led his followers forward.

The revolutionaries leapt upon the three tax farmers. Diviya screamed out his own fears. The violence against kin was surreal, matching the strange panic that exploded all over the colony as its last hours played out.

The tax farmers struggled, stirring graphite fines in the vanishing gravity of the asteroid. The revolutionaries pinned the tax farmers upside down. Their steel fingers waved uselessly and their mouths were exposed. Diviya's conspirators held tight to the frozen subsurface.

The tax collectors cried out with crackling radio noise that carried far on the great asteroid. But while the colony was launching the migration, no one would notice. Too many hurried to save the princesses, the princes, and themselves.

In this chaos, the workers' revolution could become real.

One of the three tax farmers appeared to be a landlord by the brightness of his soul. He was the most dangerous. Beneath the hardened carapace of boron carbide, his soul spattered the hard, energetic radiation from uranium and thorium, and the soft, diffuse glow from tritium and potassium. The landlord's soul spoke frantically. Diviya's soul was strangely quiet; it feared Diviya.

The landlord's rows of short legs waved helplessly and he was hot. His soul heated the landlord's whole triangular body. Although it was a sin to waste reaction mass, Diviya did not put it past the landlord to pour the stored volatiles over his soul, launching himself, and everyone on him, into orbit. They could not hold him if that happened.

Diviya reached into the landlord's mouth with the pry and pliers that doctors carried. Deep in the landlord's mouth, Diviya pried back supporting metal bands made to hold the soul. The landlord understood what Diviya was doing and in his horror released a cool spray of thrust from the trailing edge of his fins.

But then Diviya had the soul free and he held the rectangular cake of radioactive isotopes in the shine of the pulsar. They all stared and listened in awe. Only Diviya had ever seen a naked soul. These revolutionaries were farm workers, ore processors, and haulers of regolith.

Diviya turned to Tejas. The skate turned onto his back, exposing fingers blunted from months of scratching frozen nitrogen and graphite from around hard chondrules. Charged regolith dust grimed his open mouth. Diviya set the still-screaming soul within Tejas' mouth.

Any skate could have a soul. Souls gestated in the large ore plants within the queen, near the kilns where the skates themselves were fired. Diviya had been chosen to be a doctor and received a soul only by chance. The soulless could farm volatiles, but could never find radioactive isotopes in the regolith, or fly from the asteroid. Diviya fastened the bands, locking the soul into place. They turned over the newly ensouled skate.

The panic of the hive heightened. The throbbing radio signals from the queen signaled that she was preparing to launch the first wave of princesses. Diviya hurried to remove the souls from the other two tax farmers and place them into Barini and U'gra.

The souls beamed their fear and outrage in radio static. Once, hive drones would have come and arrested them all, but this was the end of the world the souls had preached.

Far off, above the great bulk of the queen, the leaders of the migration launched. Bursts of hot volatiles, briefly visible through the thickening dust, launched princesses at tremendous velocities. Six. Seven. Eight. Waves of princes and their courtiers threw themselves into space after the potential hive queens. Then, a wave of slower-moving, uncoordinated tax farmers and landlords. Diviya's soul began speaking, at first in quiet, fearful tones, but then more strongly.

"Come," Diviya said. "There is no more time!"

Dozens of revolutionaries had crowded them. The soulless. They had put their faith in Diviya. They retreated at his words, stunned. And Diviya's heart cracked. Of everything that they had hoped for all of the workers, they only had time to save three.

Not even save. There was every chance that Diviya and his three ensouled revolutionaries would be killed by either the shaghāl or the migration itself. They were not princes, fed volatiles and radioactive dust by scores of workers. They had been given every nugget of frozen volatiles that could be smuggled out of the work camps, but it was probably not enough.

Diviya opened a valve. A trickle of the volatiles he had stored in his body passed over his soul, super-heating. A searing mix of water, methane, ammonia, and nitrogen shot from the spouts on Diviya's trailing edge, launching him over the hive. The great, sintered ceramic bulk of the queen, dwarfing all the piles of mine tailings, and studded with the launch tubes of the princesses, lay beneath him, shrinking as he rose. The ordered lines of skates carrying ore and volatiles to her had dissolved. They fled into her now for protection she could not offer.

Beneath him, a new volley of princesses burst from the tubes, shooting past Diviya. Their steel fingers were tucked tightly beneath them and the spray of their thrust sent shivers of aching attraction through him. A squadron of princes and their servants followed. Their wide, dust-free fins turned gracefully, briefly reflecting starlight from smooth carapaces of boron carbide, beneath fine, tight nets of steel mesh. They turned the webs of steel to face the Hero pulsar, absorbing its microwaves as they thrust.

Breath-taking. Intimidating. Kin.

Diviya and his revolutionaries thrust hard after them. The horizon of the great asteroid fell away on all sides, revealing the clean dark of space. The colony, with the hive and its halo of slums became a dark, irregular shape, lit only by the bright points of the few souls still there. Then the third and last wave of princesses launched, with every soul that could, even those who could only thrust briefly.

Invisible were the workers left behind, colorless as the dirt. He'd fought for them, tended their hurts, and had wanted to bring them on migration. Those brother skates tugged at his heart, but eerily, less than he expected. Diviya was enlightened, rational, but the strength of instinct surprised him. Diviya felt the urge to protect the princes, clouded with his attraction for the princesses. He needed to control both feelings.

His soul whispered the navigational liturgy to him and he wanted to follow its lead. His soul had migrated before, in a successful prince of a generation past. His soul carried the wisdom of flight angles through the vastness of space and time, how to block the shaghāl from reaching the princesses and the princes. Each soul knew the same way to the same spawning ground waiting for them in the future. But to his soul, those workers left behind were no more important than the giant shell of the abandoned queen after the princesses had launched.

The smaller pod of shaghāl proceeded to the hive. They were radio-reflective, not thrusting, but riding the Hero's Voice with mesh sails catching the powerful microwaves shouting out each second. The dying queen served by soulless skates would feed the predators. The larger pod's course would intercept the migration.

Past

Diviya hopped over the regolith, arriving at Work Farm Number Seven. Several days of bribing low-level officials with frozen nitrogen had gotten him a permit. A big skate with a sleek carapace patrolled the edge of the farm. Under a thin layer of

dust, the grand prince's insignia was visible, scored in the ceramic on both leading edges of his wide horizontal fins. The lens at the front of his head showed the hot radioactive light of his soul behind it.

"What do you want?" the tax farmer said.

"Someone called for a doctor," Diviya said. He tilted his leading edges lower, showing less of his own soul. The landlord's thugs were not worth antagonizing. From his gullet, Diviya pulled a thin sheet of beaten aluminum inscribed with his permit.

"Go back to the hive," the tax farmer said. "We got the lazy skate back to work."

"I've come all this way. I may as well check on the other workers," Diviya said.

The tax farmer threw the permit. "Waste your time if you want."

"Thank you," Diviya said, retrieving the permit. Rows of steel fingers undulated beneath him and he hopped onto the work farm.

The farm was so large that the curvature of the asteroid nearly hid the great mounds of debris at the far end. The flat, triangular bodies of the skates moved over the regolith, digging and sifting with sharp fingers. Their radio sails were pulled tight across the tops of their wide horizontal fins, to feed on the radio and microwaves of the Hero's Voice.

The workers were almost all soulless. Some few were given weak souls to find radioactive grains during their sifting. Diviya had received a respectable soul. Doctors needed keen, penetrating sight. The tiniest injuries and earliest-stage material stresses could only be detected with radiation reflected back from ceramic carapaces.

Diviya passed a mound of regolith scraped from the surface of the asteroid, sifted for icy clays, hard nuggets of nitrogen and carbon dioxide, and iron-nickel granules for the foundries and kilns within the queen. The tailing mounds were chondrules of silicates and magnetites. Atop the hill was one of the grand prince's landlords.

The landlord preached a droning liturgy from the apex of the mound, but the words were not his. The soul behind his eye recited the sagas for him to repeat. The metronomic rhythms of electrical buzzing and snapping carried some distance before they were drowned by the inscrutable mystery of the Hero's Voice. Tax farmers and other landlords heard the liturgy, and retransmitted it, complete with its numbing, repetitive rhythms.

Diviya had become adept at ignoring his soul. Otherwise he would spend his days in sagas and parables that froze the class struggle into hardened clay. He moved among the workers. He knew many of them by name, from protests and rallies.

"Good morning, Esha," Diviya said to a dusty skate. Esha's fingers moved in a blur beneath him, scrabbling at the hard regolith, creating a cloud of dust in the microgravity. Esha was a good worker. Several nuggets of nitrogen and carbon dioxide shone in dusty pride beside him. A respectable meal for a prince or even one of the princesses.

"Good morning, Diviya. What brings you out here?"

"I heard a doctor was needed."

"That was days ago. Dwani was beaten."

"Where is he?"

"They're supervising him close to the west mound."

A tax farmer approached.

"Get back to work!" he said. "Hey! Who are you?"

Diviya turned to show the mark of a doctor that had been scored onto both leading edges of his fins. The tax farmer grunted derisively. Diviya was a doctor to workers. If he'd had a patron, he would have been the doctor to princes and perhaps even the princesses. Tax farmers did not consider country doctors like Diviya anything more than workers reaching above their station, although they themselves happily came to him with their aches.

"Hoy!" the tax farmer said. "You didn't call me to pick this up," he said, pushing both Diviya and Esha aside to grab the nuggets of frozen gasses.

"I just found them," Esha said.

"That's what they all say! Get back to work. And you, doctor, get done whatever you were doing before I revoke your permit." The tax farmer hopped towards the next worker.

"Go see the skates after you see Dwani," Esha said. "They'll want news of him. The workers look up to you. You received a soul, but you haven't forgotten them."

The droning of the liturgy resumed. Like the Hero's Voice, the meaning of the words had decayed.

Present

The hive vanished behind him. The minuteness of their former home was spiritually humbling. Stippled stars on black night, close companions since birth, now wrapped him in their vastness. His struggle for the workers, all his words to free his brothers, seemed hollow here. And the migration might still die stillborn, like a drone without a soul. No future. Not even a present.

His soul was silent, perhaps hoping that Diviya had resolved himself to his duty. He fell behind the thrusting princes, still so far that they were just tiny points of hot breath. Perspective placed them near the unknowable voice of the pulsar. The thought of approaching the Hero terrified him.

Diviya's soul began, in staccato radio crackles, the liturgy of migration: vectors and star sightings, landmarks, and flight speeds drawn from the sagas. The souls had done this before. They adjusted the liturgy each migration, to account for the drift of the asteroids, but the mythic arc of the Hero and the Maw was unchanging.

Diviya knew the migration route. He'd studied it, perhaps in a way unseemly for a country doctor. He eased his thrust, contrary to the liturgy. His soul repeated the timings of the thrusts, and their strengths. Diviya ignored his soul. He needed to be trailing the princes and princesses for what he wanted to try. And he needed his thrust later.

The pulsar became a fat dot. Its gravity drew him onward and its voice had become a deafening, constant shout. Diviya unfurled his radio sail. It bloomed outward, bound to him by many fine steel wires. He angled his sail so that the microwaves pushed him off a collision with the collapsed star. The force would grow as he approached, compensating for the rising gravity.

The pulsar had bloated into a fat disk. The Hero's Voice was too pure and loud to be audible. Microwaves seared tiny arcs of electricity across Diviya twice each second, filling him with life for what must come. He was sick with overcharging. His soul recited the prayer of brushing against divinity. When that finished, his soul told the parable of the prince fleeing before waves of the shaghāl. The Hero made Diviya large and small. Diviya could not turn to look how close the shaghāl might be, nor even if his fellow revolutionaries had kept pace with him. One approached divinity alone.

Past

Diviya hopped to find Dwani. The strip-mined regolith fields were uneven; layers of frozen dust revealed blocks of immovable iron-nickel. Such large masses of ex-

posed iron-nickel did strange things to the Hero's Voice. Where they could, workers dumped mine tailings upon them. But sometimes all the fingers in the colony could not cover them and the odd protrusions sparked and crackled, interpreting the Hero's Voice in their own way, like the mad.

Diviya reached the west mound, an immense pile of mine tailings looking over the entirety of the plain. It had been here long before the queen and her grand prince had arrived.

"Poor workers," Diviya said. "How long had they toiled to make that mound?"

"Long enough to launch generations of princesses and princes onto the migration," his soul said, "fully fueled, with discerning souls to guide the foundation of new colonies."

"At remarkable cost," Diviya said.

"Remarkable that we survive at all," the soul said.

The tax farmers inspected his permit. His soul shone as brightly as theirs, although these skates had likely been extorting bribes of volatiles from the workers for months. They might have enough breath to migrate with the princes and courtiers. The work of tax farmer and landlord was difficult, but could be lucrative.

Difficult skates worked the fields around the west mound. Fewer breaks, harsher discipline. Not that workers had many privileges. The workers here were slower, and the digging was hard. A tax farmer indicated a lone worker close by the base of the mound.

"Dwani?" Diviya asked when he had neared.

The skate turned and Diviya recoiled. The worker's carapace had been smashed where the clean lines of the leading edge came to a point. Near the vertex was a jagged hole, dusted with regolith attracted by the electricity within Dwani. The lens of the eye was so scratched that no part of its surface was smooth.

"Who is it?" Dwani said.

"Diviya."

"The doctor?"

"What happened, Dwani?"

"The tax farmers went after a few organizers. Reinforced ceramic doesn't stand up well to iron rods."

A horrified sadness crept over Diviya as he neared Dwani. The radioactive shine of Diviya's soul scattered back from Dwani's carapace, revealing many microscopic fractures. Some of the cracks were so large that Diviya would not have even needed a soul to see them. They reached far along Dwani's fins, one nearly to the trailing edge. Dust, especially the static-charged graphite fines of the regolith, infected the cracks. To say nothing of the dust entering through the hole near Dwani's damaged eye. The dust would soon interfere with the neural wiring.

"Whoever did this didn't mean for you to live long," Diviya said.

"I can't move some of my fingers, but I can still work." As if to make light of it, Dwani moved his fingers. Only a half-dozen of the steel limbs moved. The rest dangled. "I hope you didn't come all this way just for me. Unless you have some cure."

"One of the committee members got word out. I came as soon as I could."

"It won't do any good," Dwani said. "The tax farmers know their job."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Do something. More than just writing little manifestos and three-point plans on committee broadsheets."

"Violence isn't getting us anywhere, Dwani."

"Coward."

"There's no end in what you're doing. You and a school of other committee leaders make it sound as if a total upset of the hive will somehow make us free."

"We'll be free when we are not oppressed."

"Half of us will be dead, win or lose," Diviya said. "And the chaos will do nothing except cripple the hive. We'll be easy pickings for the shaghāl."

"We already are."

"The princesses too?" Diviya said. "What is the point of all our work if even the princesses do not get away? Extinction is not social change."

"You never resist," Dwani said. "That's why they gave you a soul."

Present

Diviya's cry of suffering mixed with the tireless booming of the Hero's Voice. His soul had begun crying long ago. Weight crushed them. Diviya felt as heavy as an asteroid or a star, important to the world, possessing meaning. And yet, he was tiny. The Hero was now an angry blue and purple sphere. A beam of burning microwaves ripped across its face twice a second, throwing Diviya back by his radio sail. Strange radiations he'd never seen swirled in sickly oranges and reds on the pulsar's surface.

Diviya reached perigee, the closest approach to the Hero, and he thrust. It ached. His thrust burned. The Hero's Voice stung. The pull of his radio sail creaked his whole carapace. He was going to snap.

And then the Hero was behind him, His Voice throwing Diviya forward. His soul, between bouts of terror, repeated the correct speeds and distances of the migration. The temptation to relent to the soul was strong, but Diviya followed the migration at a distance with his co-revolutionaries in clumsy formation around him.

The lighthouse beams of the Hero's Voice propelled them faster and faster. On this course, the radio waves would accelerate and charge them continuously as they flew straight and true towards the black hole called the Maw.

It was a long way between the Hero and the Maw. Sometimes half or more of a migration could fall to the shaghāl before the Maw had a chance to destroy them. And that was when the courtiers distracted the shaghāl and led them away.

And the shaghāl certainly followed. Diviya held his terror in check. The shaghāl were big, strong and fast, riding under enormous radio sails, leading with maws large enough to crush a skate.

The Hero's Voice already dimmed as they moved away. But Diviya listened for any drop in the Voice beyond that, which would be the first sign that the shaghāl had found him, had picked him as food. In all the sagas and the teachings of the souls, the pursuing shaghāl placed themselves between their prey and the Hero so that the creatures of appetite slowly crept up with their great mouths while the skates drifted helplessly in their silent shadow.

Yet sometimes the ways of the devil were instructive. Diviya settled behind a distant prince, cutting off the radio and microwaves with his sail. The prince tilted his sail, this way and that, trying to escape the shadow, but without the Voice, his sail was just wire mesh.

The prince retracted his sail, a prelude in the sagas to thrusting. He extended the sail indecisively. Breath was a hard object, sifted or picked from the regolith, but it possessed a holiness. It was the Hero's gift for the migration. The taboo of its use was both spiritual and pragmatic. Any use of breath except in the approaches to the Hero and the Maw, in strict, soul-guided accelerations, could mean not having enough later.

"No!" Diviya's soul said, suddenly realizing what he was doing. "Stop it, you monster!"

The shadowed prince chittered electrical static, passing alarm across the migra-

tion, but it did him no good. The formation spread out. Over long hours, it passed the prince and Diviya finally moved aside, choosing another target to shadow. He drifted past the prince, who, suddenly hearing the Hero's Voice, began accelerating again. But it would not be enough.

The shaghāl had been accelerating all this time too. They were closing faster than the prince could accelerate. They would consume him, volatiles, radioisotopes, rare metals and all.

Diviya's three revolutionaries shadowed other princes. They were not as nimble as Diviya. More often than not, the princes escaped, catching radio waves that the revolutionaries had not quite blocked with their sails. But the princes still lost precious moments or minutes of acceleration.

It was working. The satisfaction tasted bitter to Diviya. He hadn't wanted this and was the first to regret it. He'd wanted some end to the suffering of the workers. The princes had forced this revolution on themselves.

One of the courtiers, trailing so far back that he perhaps sensed he would soon be shadowed, retracted his sail and gently spun in flight. Instead of an approaching shaghāl, he saw Diviya, Tejas, Barini, and Ugra. He transmitted a radio shout in anger, and unfurled his sail. He rode the microwaves expertly, sweeping close to Tejas.

Diviya cried a warning, but it was too late. The courtier crashed into Tejas and dug with sharp fingers at Tejas' eye, at his mouth, and at the wires holding his radio sail. The fingers snapped two of Tejas' four wires. Tejas pitched as his sail tilted. The courtier leapt away.

"Tejas!" Diviya yelled.

Tejas began to tumble slowly. He could not retract his sail, nor right it.

"Diviya!" Tejas called. Diviya slowly pulled ahead as all of Tejas' acceleration spun into his wild careening. "Fix my sail! Help!"

Diviya's heart cracked. There was nothing to be done. On the migration, Diviya hadn't the materials to replace snapped wires. And the shaghāl approached.

"Leave!" his soul said. "Fly on! Protect the princes and the princesses now."

"I'm sorry, Tejas!" Diviya said.

"Please!" Tejas called.

Diviya slipped behind Tejas' attacker before he could spread news of their betrayal. The courtier, suddenly without the Hero's Voice, tilted his sail, to no effect. The migration crept away from him. He shrieked warnings, but he was too far for anyone to hear, except Diviya. The migration had dispersed widely, a scripturally pure defense against shadowing by shaghāl.

"No, do not do this!" his soul said. Perhaps it had overcome its fear of Diviya. "Please."

"Do you know how many workers have suffered because of the princes?" Diviya asked. "Do you know how many have been beaten and killed?"

"You are angry," his soul said. "You do not completely understand the way the Hero has organized the hives so that the finest and strongest of skates are sent upon migration."

"They are not the best," Diviya said disgustedly. "They are the skates who have been given a soul, and then use that soul to enslave workers."

"You are wrong. You are special."

"I am not. A doctor wore out. Another was needed. I was the easiest to train. That is all. We are all the same. Souls create divisions for their own benefit."

"The hereditary information you carry in clays are all the same. Circumstances and accidents of feeding and luck have their roles, but you are all kin. We are one colony. The success of a prince is your success. We make sure our kin succeed."

"We are more than schools of clay," Diviya said. "And if we truly are all the same

kin, you won't mind if it is I instead of the princes who make the final journey with the princess."

The Hero's thinning Voice pushed Diviya toward the courtier he shadowed. When they were almost touching, Diviya tilted his sail, veered aside, and passed him. The courtier's radio sail caught the pulsar's beam and started accelerating, but the shaghāl would finish what Diviya had started.

Past

The founding queen and her grand prince had located the hive on an asteroid with a lazy rotation around an axis that pointed almost directly at the pulsar. At the pole, the queen heard the Hero's Voice tirelessly, but in the piled rubble fields near the worker slums, the low ensouled lived with short nights of quiet starvation and lethargy. The pulsar had set an hour ago and Diviya should have been resting, but he'd been invited to a workers' rally. He entered the slums.

"These are not elements of society you should be associating with," his soul said. "You and I may have a future. There may yet be time to show your talents and come into a more lucrative position, like a tax farmer, a minor landlord, or even the personal physician to a courtier. Imagine the resources you would have then for the migration."

"My future will hardly be determined by a meeting," Diviya said. A group of skates congregated ahead of them. "Look, other souls are here."

"Ensouled workers!" his soul said dismissively. "Workers are where they put souls that are incapable of memorizing the migratory routes. No one here can help you."

"Diviya!" Abhisri said. "You made it." His friend Abhisri edged from the crowd, the flat ceramic triangle of his carapace worn by months of hard building. A soul winked behind the lens of his eye. Like Diviya, he had received his soul late in life, and had become an engineer. He often spoke at rallies.

"I heard you went to the work farms? You saw Dwani?" Abhisri asked.

"The drones were thorough," Diviya said. "They cracked him."

Abhisri made a sound.

"Change is slow," Diviya said.

"Not just slow," Abhisri said, not for Diviya, but for the others. "There is no change!"

Around them, workers sparked loudly in their heads, casting radio waves. Yelling. Cheering. They knew Diviya here, but he felt trapped in the center of attention as Abhisri spoke. Diviya was not a leader. Although they read his manifestos, Diviya didn't agree with their methods.

"We cannot have slow change," Abhisri said, warming to his oration. "We cannot hop or crawl toward freedom!"

More cheers. Diviya felt like cheering, too. The gaping hole in Dwani's face would not leave his thoughts.

"We must go!" his soul said. "Now!"

"All of us are wiped out at every migration," Abhisri said. "We never migrate. Only nobles. Their hangers-on. Their enforcers."

"Revolution now!" someone yelled in the darkness.

"Overthrow the hive!"

Diviya's soul shrieked in panic. So loud that surely others around them heard it. Diviya was also alarmed. He cared about these workers. Many were his friends. He was one of them. Revolution would get them killed. A terrible nervousness crept over him as he realized that he was going to speak.

"We cannot overthrow the hive," Diviya said. "Violence will not free us."

They hissed at him in electrical static.

"The princes and their courtiers are big, well-fed, and ensouled," Diviya said. "They can fly while most of us cannot. The hive is built to repel us."

"Excellent," Diviya's soul said.

"Defeatist!" someone yelled.

"Collaborator!" someone yelled.

"Leave!" Diviya's soul said.

"This is Diviya!" Abhisri said. "Let him say his piece."

"How much time is left, do you suppose?" Diviya asked. He was nervous with all eyes upon him. "A few months? The nobles fear that they haven't enough volatiles to migrate. Courtiers fear they will not have the fuel to follow. Princes know that without the courtiers, the shaghāl will pursue them."

No one spoke. No one moved. "And we fear being left behind."

Diviya felt dizzy. He never threw himself into the middle. "What if we ask for souls for some workers?" Diviya said. "Would they give them?"

"No!" someone yelled from the darkness. "They'd beat us 'til we crack."

"Yes, they would," Abhisri said.

"So what do we do?" someone demanded.

"Offer them something," Diviya said.

A chorus of protests rose all about him.

"Offer them more than what you are producing, in exchange for souls."

"We can't do that!" someone said.

"We ask for souls? For some of us? To go on the migration?"

"Yes," Abhisri said, sounding intrigued.

"That won't work for everyone!" someone said.

"But if a dozen workers survive the migration, they become the princes of the next generation," Diviya said. "They can change the colonies that follow. Fewer tax farmers. Fewer nobles. More souls for the workers."

"It isn't enough!" someone yelled. A chorus supported him.

"Of course it isn't enough," Diviya said. "But it is the best we can get right now. As long as all the workers are wiped out every generation, the workers of the next must restart the struggle as if it were the first time. We must be in solidarity with the brothers of tomorrow whose clay has not yet been fired."

The crowd silenced. A shade of the immensity of their task, of a sense of history and time slipped over them.

"Abhisri!" they cried. And some yelled "Diviya."

"No!" his soul said. "This is against the will of the Hero."

"Some will say this is against the will of the Hero," Diviya said to the workers. "The Hero made the princesses and their suitors and the migration, but where in the sagas did the Hero make tax farmers?"

Laughter greeted his joke, but sparking anger, too. "Nowhere!"

"And we have a leader," Diviya said. "Abhisri can take our ideas to the princes."

"Diviya!" some said, including Abhisri.

"Abhisri!" Diviya said, and was relieved when that cry was taken up.

Then other skates spoke. They hadn't the rhetoric to speak at a prince's reception, but their strength as orators lay in the visceral reality of their wanting. These workers scratched and scrubbed the regolith each day for nuggets of gasses to launch princesses and their suitors into the future. They had more right to their words than Diviya had to his. They deserved to migrate. As the speeches went on, workers gave Diviya gentle double-knocks of approval with the tips of their fins.

"Leave!" his soul said. "You endanger yourself and me!"

"Hive drones won't come here," Diviya whispered to his soul. "Drones are lazy and greedy and spend their time on the hills."

"They employ informants."

"Among the workers?"

"The soulless will die when the shaghāl come, but many seek to ease their time with easier work."

A worker neared, leaning the whole leading edge of his fin against Diviya's, until their faces were close.

"Will you migrate, Diviya?" the worker asked.

"I have no patron. I have not been given any breath either."

"You will not be given any," the worker said. "This is a bad year and a bad site for the hive. Many of the landlords will be here with us in the end."

"Famine," Diviya said.

"Take this." Beneath them, the worker's fingers passed Diviya a half-dozen large nuggets of frozen gases. Nitrogen. Carbon dioxide. Methane. "Eat it!" the worker whispered, so close that only the two of them could hear.

"I can't," Diviya said.

"You must! You are one of us, Diviya."

Diviya stared at the gift. The worker might have done any number of things with this much raw reaction mass. He could have bribed tax counters, or even a low-status prince if he could get close enough.

"Hide them, quick!" the worker said.

Diviya put them in his mouth and deep into his gullet, past his soul, so as to not melt them. Over time, he could melt and refreeze the gases to purify them.

The worker melted into the crowd, as if suddenly shy. Diviya retreated, too. This was enormous. When he'd been apprenticed to a doctor, he'd expected to die in terror when the shaghāl came. Even when the hive had given him a soul, elevating him into the lowest of the privileged, he'd not changed his thinking. Without volatiles, there was no point in dreaming wishes. But now, this stranger, from nowhere, had given him a gift, one that separated him from the workers as irrevocably as a soul could.

"We will migrate!" said Diviya's soul. "Although this is not nearly enough breath for such a journey, it is a start. Let us leave."

"The meeting is not finished," Diviya said.

"Everyone here is a revolutionary!" the soul said. "Someone will denounce them all to the hive drones and the princes."

Present

The migration had broken into three streams, each with at least one princess and a dozen or so attendant princes and courtiers. Diviya followed the fastest princess, the one farthest ahead. She was the least likely to be targeted by the shaghāl.

Barini and Ugra followed. He did not know either one well. Barini was a hauler of regolith who participated in rallies. Ugra had tilled the soil and his musical talent produced electrical melodies, into which others fit political rhymes and slogans. Neither seemed a likely revolutionary, but perhaps he wasn't either. Dwani, Abhisri, and all the real leaders were dead, with all the workers of their generation except for three.

The three of them became methodical and pitiless. Their targets tried to evade the sudden silencing of the Hero's Voice, with only some success. Hours passed. Then

days. Then weeks. The Hero's Voice attenuated. The best acceleration from the pulsar was in the past. Now, speed grew in slow increments. The princess was a point far ahead, but the courtiers and the princes had fallen behind.

Diviya retracted his sail, and exhaled a puff of volatiles. He slowly pivoted, until he faced the pulsar. The Hero was a sad, cool point in the blackness, flashing thin radio and microwaves twice a second, lower in tone and quieter. Diviya felt dislocated. His class struggle felt minuscule. This cold vastness offered neither light, nor asteroids upon which to shelter. Far behind, the shaghāl appeared tiny, but their radioactive souls shone hard and point-like. Seven of them followed. Diviya exhaled another puff to stop his rotation, and unfurled his radio sail.

They were close to the princes and courtiers. Weeks of slow work had made each of them adept at stealing the microwaves destined for the sails of the princes. The pulsar's beam was so distant now that its push was faint. Diviya and his companions were tiring.

A lone princess sailed ahead of the princes and the revolutionaries. The sounds of the souls far in front of them were frantic. The princess ought to be protected at all times.

Diviya felt the Voice of the Hero abruptly thin. A moment of panic stole over him. His soul shrieked. Diviya had been preparing for this for weeks, imagining the angles, the time he would have. He was not completely shadowed, not yet. Some of the distant Voice reached him still. He tilted his sail hard, catching the few microwaves reaching him, accelerating sideways. At first, nothing seemed to be happening. His soul recited the litany of the sacrifice, for both of them. But it was working. Slowly. After long minutes, the Hero's Voice became louder, and he emerged from the shadow.

Diviya sailed wide to stay away from the shaghāl who had found him, and then snapped his sail back to accelerate again. He felt weak. The sagas called the starvation from the Hero's Voice the small death. His soul quieted for a long time.

"It is not what we wanted," his soul whispered. "We dream of being at the front of the school, with the princess. But we are not. We too must serve. We will not escape again, but we may atone for our crimes by leading the shaghāl away. I was weak. I should have opposed you more. Morality is the responsibility of the soul. I have failed, but we now may seek redemption."

"I never wanted to be a prince," Diviya whispered back.

"Come!" Diviya cried to Barini and Ugra. "Let us create a new hive where workers are free!" Diviya slowly slipped into place to shadow another prince.

In the fourth month of the migration, a shadow fell over Barini. It was sudden and complete. The shaghāl was close and Barini had no hope of sailing free.

"Barini!" Diviya cried in radio static. "Thrust! Exhale!"

"No!" Diviya's soul said. "On the migration, only a princess may exhale. All breath must be saved for the Maw."

"Barini!" Diviya said. "Thrust!"

"Everyone has a place. He too who is caught serves the hive," Diviya's soul said.

The soul was not wrong. Every courtier and prince lost kept a shaghāl occupied long enough for time dilation to mean they would never be seen again.

But the soul was also wrong. The calculation was grimly mathematical and religious, weighted to favor the nobility. The princess was indispensable, but the princes and courtiers were more than interchangeable. Barini had tilled the soil, given the princesses breath, given flesh and life to new souls. He had as much right as any to be among the fathers of a new generation.

Diviya's words did nothing for Barini. Diviya's soul recited a litany of complacency

and sacrifice, as Barini's soul probably whispered to him. The soul seduced, by pulling on instinct.

Barini retracted his radio sail against his back. He began to silently rotate, his mouth and eye shut, hiding the hard radiation of his soul. Instinct was stronger.

Past

Diviya moved in the low circles of the hive itself, with ensouled skates whose skills were too valuable to be spent on farming. Accountants and building engineers worked around the queen and hive, erecting the nets of fine wire on high scaffolds, capturing the constantly beamed Voice for the queen, weighing workers bearing regolith and frozen volatiles into the hive, scheduling work.

The low ensouled had some leisure with which to imitate the princes and courtiers. They did not have the opera house in which to put on the sagas, but they performed for each other in the hollows between mounds. They did not have libraries, but they retold legends and parables, refining their manners, so that someday, if the chance came, they might mingle successfully with the princes and their courtiers.

Although he mostly tended workers, Diviya was also physician to clerks and petty functionaries who could not get higher-status physicians. It was always difficult for a cold skate, living at the temperature of the surrounding regolith, to carry a hot soul. Even the ceramics of boron carbide sintered and fired in the kilns of the queen creaked with distortions of temperature. In the worst cases, carapaces could even crack.

Diviya's hive patients possessed souls, and jockeyed for patronage. They guarded their own opportunities and blocked skates like Diviya from the princes. This, from what Diviya understood, suited the princes, who received gifts constantly from these petty clerks.

They were all taught to sacrifice, and for a while the idea of sacrifice could be romantic and ennobling. Freshly kilned skates were reared on the parables of the good worker, and especially the sacrifices of Narah the courtier. Narah had led away some of the shaghāl and the saga spoke lovingly of his last moments. It felt heroic, its romance layered by generations of retelling.

Yet it ran deeper than sacrifice. The males of the hive carried the same hereditary clays from the queen. The contributions of the few grand princes who had survived the migration accounted for limited variation in the hive. Diviya was brother to the princes, the tax farmers, the landlords, and the workers.

But privilege and status did not creep into a hive. Inequity stormed in, like hive drones breaking up a protest. The queen produced new souls with the radioisotopes sifted out of the regolith. Those who received souls no longer depended on capacitors to work and move through the night. The spiritual wealth became the power to see the radioisotopes of other souls or find more in the regolith. Most importantly, radioactive souls turned frozen gases into hot thrust.

Diviya met with Abhisri in the camps of the low ensouled outside the hive. Abhisri had bribed a courtier for a meeting with Prince Lasiya. Diviya was nervous. He had never met a prince. He doubted his ability to persuade. He had channeled debate among like-minded skates, but this was his own idea now and a high audience. It had been easy to speak in the dark to workers, deep in the slums. This was the hive, vast and monumental.

"This is bad," whispered his soul. "Once you speak with this prince, we are marked, you and I. The accountants will look in their records to see what soul you have and they will put marks there against both of us."

Diviya and Abhisri approached a side entrance guarded by two big drones. Prince Lasiya's secretary emerged from behind the drones. The brightness of his soul was stabbing. The lines of his ceramic shell were sleek and clean. The leading edges bore the emblems of his patron. Abhisri pulled a lump of distilled and refrozen breath from his gullet. Possessing it was a crime. So much breath ought to have been destined for the princes and princesses. The secretary took the bribe without otherwise moving. It vanished into his gullet. The hive drones studiously ignored the transaction.

"I am listening," the secretary said.

"We were told we would be speaking with Prince Lasiya," Diviya said.

"The prince is not available."

"My words are for him alone," Diviya said.

The hot circle of radiation from the secretary's soul shone full on Diviya. A submissive reverence stole over Diviya's soul. A fearful thought crept into Diviya's mind. Might the souls have some secret language, mediated perhaps by particle decay? It was an eerie, paranoid thought, and yet, something of substance passed between these souls and Diviya imagined his whole life being reported.

"I will bring any message to Prince Lasiya."

Diviya and Abhisri backed away and spoke in low tones, in the rough dialect of the workers.

"He won't bring the message anywhere," Abhisri said.

"We have no other choice."

"Do what he says!" Diviya's soul whispered. "There is danger here."

"A prince would have listened on his own authority," Abhisri said. "This courtier will report what we say in the worst light if you tell him your offer."

"The workers held back a riot so we could make this offer. We must try." Diviya turned to the courtier. "Tell Prince Lasiya that there may be a way for the workers and the princes to come to an understanding to increase farm yields."

"Go on."

"This is a message for Prince Lasiya."

"Something as important as farm yields should not be toyed with. Where are your loyalties, Doctor?"

"My loyalties are with the hive."

"Would your soul say the same?" the secretary asked. The shine of his soul was a beam, like the Voice of the Hero itself, focused through the smooth lens of his eye, in through Diviya's eye. Diviya felt hot.

"Of course," Diviya said.

"If your loyalties are correct, then speak of increasing farm yields, Doctor."

Diviya hesitated. "The workers dig hard, but the regolith is poor. Additional incentives could make them eager to work even harder."

"Any worker who is not working as hard as he can is guilty of a crime," the secretary said.

"The treatment of the workers makes them less effective," Diviya said. "Beatings make them resentful. I have seen skates broken and killed by tax farmers. Broken skates produce nothing."

"Slack workers must be forced to do their duty. Examples inspire others."

Diviya's quick words were difficult to contain. He had urged restraint on workers on so many occasions, so that they could bring forward something of substance. Only the thought that he was representing many workers held his anger back.

"There is a better way to inspire workers," Diviya said.

"Odd that centuries of experience did not find it, yet a country doctor has," the secretary said.

Diviya controlled his fear. Abhisri edged backward.

"Workers move regolith, find the volatiles and radioisotopes, yet know they will never migrate. If a few workers could receive souls, the additional radioisotopes found would soon repay the gift."

"Souls for the workers?" the secretary scoffed. "The apportionment of souls is a sober process. There are not enough volatiles now for the court. If breath were further thinned, instead of a quarter of the migration outrunning the shaghāl and the Maw, no one would."

"More skates on migration will draw away more shaghāl from the princesses," Diviya said, "especially if they are slower."

"You consign them to die? Do they know this?"

"They are already dead. We all are. When the migration flees, every worker will sit waiting with the empty hive for the shaghāl to come."

"You are naïve, doctor," the secretary said. "Every additional migrating skate takes breath from the princesses and princes. The sagas are filled with cautionary tales of migrants falling into the Maw, or even the Hero, when they lack breath. Your reckless ideas would jeopardize the whole migration."

"Not if we could find more volatiles," Diviya said.

"Ah," the secretary said, and Diviya felt as if he'd stepped into a trap. "Let us explore your thoughts on farming. How much more could workers do?"

"That would be based on how much incentive was offered."

"Treason," the secretary said, with the tone of someone commenting on the procession of the stars. "Do you know the punishment for treason? For withholding breath or radioisotopes?"

"I know it." Diviya said. He was cold beneath that hot stare.

"Then let us pick a strategy to get those additional volatiles."

"Incentives?" Diviya asked.

"I do not trust incentives. Even among the princes, not every skate can be trusted. Fear and disincentives are the most consistently effective methods."

Present

The flashes of radiation from near the black hole resolved into searing weaves of curtained light. Oranges. Reds. Whites. Sharp rays leapt from infalling gas, heating Diviya's soul, even though they were still days away. And the Maw was loud. It endlessly consumed the breath of the world. The infalling volatiles crackled with electrical panic. Loud, frightening snaps.

The enormity of what they approached dwarfed even Diviya's imagination. The rain of hot particles traced a line around the Maw, outlining a monster large enough to swallow even the Hero.

Weeks of careful work by Diviya and Ugra had pulled four more princes from the school. Soon, the princess would be unguided. Her soul carried other liturgies, secrets of growing a hive and waves and waves of little skates, but not navigational liturgies. Diviya had caught up to the trailing edge of the school. Ugra was close.

The Maw's own kin, the shaghāl, followed and Diviya imagined their enthusiasm as they neared the hive of their master. They shadowed the princes and courtiers, creeping closer and closer hour by hour. Diviya retracted his sail and exhaled the faintest of breaths to rotate slowly. His insides went cold.

He'd never seen a shaghāl. Three of them followed, one closely. He'd pieced his imaginings from the liturgies and sagas. Reality outstripped his nightmares. The shaghāl were big, reflecting light from hard ceramic and metal. Their bodies, triangular and

flattened like a skate's, had long steel fingers for sharp grasping. It was as if a school of grand princes had been transformed by the Maw itself into engines of appetite.

The leading shaghāl thrust powerfully, leaping forward to hug Ugra in great fingers. It stuck a tube into Ugra's mouth and sucked away his breath. Ugra's fingers waved wildly, scratching at the carapace of his captor, until the shaghāl cracked Ugra open around the mouth, exposing the soul. Diviya did not see the rest. The shaghāl held Ugra and thrust outward, onto an orbit to carry it far around the black hole and back to the archipelago of asteroids where new hives would be founded.

And then Diviya was alone. There was no more revolution. There was only he, a princess, a prince, and a pair of pursuing shaghāl. Between Diviya and the prince, Diviya would always be second. The prince's soul was larger, hotter, making his thrust more powerful than anything Diviya could make. The shaghāl would reach Diviya first.

Then Diviya too fell into shadow.

"He too who is caught serves the hive," his soul whispered. That was the role the princes had for him. And the priesthood of souls. The poor brother must die for the rich brother to live.

He too who is caught serves the hive.

Diviya thrust.

"No!" his soul said. Diviya blasted precious volatiles behind him, emerging from the shadow of the shaghāl and even accelerating closer to the lead prince, the one closest to the princess.

"Monster!" the prince said. "I saw you waste your breath on yourself!"

Diviya rode his exhalation, coming close to the prince. Both souls protested, shrieking, warning the prince with panicked static, but the prince did not understand. Diviya clamped onto him, undersurface to undersurface where his fingers could reach the prince's mouth. Belatedly, the prince scored Diviya's carapace with sharp fingers.

The prince's violence almost shook Diviya away. Diviya dug into the prince's mouth, for the hot radioactive soul. Recriminations were loud in Diviya's head, difficult to block out.

The prince's soul was enormous. He had taken the best radioisotopes. And many ices to be sure, enough to become the next Grand Prince, if Diviya had not caught up to him.

Diviya had learned from Dwani. He would rather end the next generation than let this prince recreate the colony they had left.

Diviya's fingers scrabbled at the fine bands holding the prince's soul. The souls screamed. Diviya's with memory. The prince's with terror. Princely fingers broke off some of Diviya's. Diviya snapped one of the bands, then another, then another.

The prince's soul drifted free.

The four of them shared a moment of disembodied terror. They screamed. And the prince went perfectly still.

Diviya held the screaming soul, its radioactive shine lighting the tireless night, as he pushed away the stunned prince. Diviya slipped the soul into his gullet, unfurled his radio sail and drifted clear.

The prince wobbled and drifted. What were his thoughts now as justice was given to him? Did he blame Diviya, blind to his own role? Perhaps this was not even justice. They approached the Maw, where death became victorious over life, darkness over light.

They raced so quickly that the red stars stippling the darkness had brightened to blue. Only Diviya, the princess, and the shaghāl following them remained and they lived a quiescent fugue. Time became meaningless and long. The great sail of the shaghāl was furled. The Hero was so far, his Voice so quiet, that sails were decorations of brighter lives while they entered the mythic land of the dead.

Before them, the Maw cloaked itself in vast fields of hot clouds, but the breath of a

thousand migrations was a poor shroud for the monstrosity of the Maw's hunger. Light burned from beneath the clouds as warning. Speeding blues, falling greens, and throbbing reds each marked some particle falling into the Maw.

Diviya's spiritual terror, for all that he had set aside the sermons and sagas, was visceral. He trembled. The souls within him, his own and the stolen one, quaked. His soul's whispers had become hypnotic and he wanted to surrender. To believe.

He was falling, accelerating. The Maw had noticed him and it summoned him. It was dangerous to be seen by the Maw, yet only here could the migration be completed. Here, any differences in speed would be multiplied. The princess was still ahead of him. No one had been showing her the way. Diviya's soul, between bouts of confession and recriminations, recited coordinates he would not follow. Diviya thrust forward, using up more of his precious volatiles, until he was beside her.

She was a sleek, flat skate, larger than he, but built more toughly. Her soul was incoherent with fear, but she was brave. Within her she carried flat matrices of clay, stacked one upon the other, containing the hereditary secrets for the next generation encoded in the atomic gaps in the lattice of the clay crystals themselves. These leaves, paired with the ones he carried, would create the next generation.

"Are you ready, my prince?" she asked. Diviya shivered with excitement. *My Prince.* To be beside a princess, near the eerie strangeness of the Maw, was like being in a saga.

"I will lead you past the Maw," Diviya said.

"We are only two."

He found her suddenly young, although they were pressed and kilned in the same queen. She'd surely never questioned the powers who had cosseted her. She'd never had friends starved or beaten to death. Of course she was young.

"We must go," Diviya said, taking a star fix and comparing it to what he'd been taught by the souls. He was not taking their path.

Diviya understood the role of time dilation in the migration. Skates launched themselves into the future, leaping over generations of shaghāl whose population collapsed when bereft of prey. And when the skates established a new colony, few shaghāl were left to hunt them.

To the skates migrating around the Maw and back to the archipelago of asteroids, the trip lasted a single year. To the unmoving world, they were gone for seventeen. The skates coordinated their leap. Those who survived reunited not only in space, but also in time. Every acceleration and angle was perfectly calculated. The smallest error might leave a skate weeks, months, or even years from the rest of the migration.

But Diviya was not leading the princess seventeen years into the future. Their culture was bankrupt, built upon the broken carapaces of workers. No matter what happened, neither Diviya nor the princess would ever see anyone from their hive again. Shorter migrations were more dangerous, taking paths closer to the Maw and harder accelerations at perigee. Diviya had worked out the trajectories, without the help of his soul. He was leaping thirteen years into the future.

"Follow!" Diviya cried, over the protest of his soul. Diviya aimed into the hot clouds around the Maw and thrust.

Past

Diviya and Abhisri had left the secretary, shaken in themselves. The secretary had issued remarkably detailed instructions to them on who he wanted watched among the workers. There was little doubt that should Diviya or Abhisri fail to report to him, their souls would be removed, and the two of them killed.

"Disincentive," the secretary had said, "is more reliable."

Diviya and Abhisri had no intention of reporting on the workers, but they had a little time before they had to give something to the secretary. They passed messages to Esha and other work farm unionists. They struck secret committees, to plan a true strike, to grind the industry of the hive to a halt. They met in the worst of the shanties, where hive drones seldom passed.

The Hero precessed auspiciously from the Constellation of the Good Courtier to the Constellation of the Farmer, signaling the arrival of the longest night of the year. Workers could not move regolith without the shine of the Hero. Even the tax collectors were reluctant to push workers on the longest night, which became a time for singing and performing the snippets of the sagas in the regolith fields and the slums.

Diviya was with the workers' committee when the hive drones thrust in, carrying metal weights. They threw the weights just before landing, cracking workers. Diviya barely leapt out of the way. Workers scattered in terror as drones landed on them, striking ceramic with steel, tearing out wires that absorbed microwaves. Rows of hive drones ringed them.

Abhisri pushed Diviya into an alley filled with panicking workers. "Fly!" Abhisri said.

"I can't!"

"You're the only one who can! This is big! They don't know you carry breath."

A hive drone fell upon Abhisri, striking with a pick in its hard fingers. Diviya leapt on the drone, scratching and hitting. Diviya had never fought anything, and the drone was trained for this. The drone jerked, sending Diviya tumbling high in the microgravity. Below, the workers were awash in hive drones. They were lost.

Diviya exhaled a breath to correct his tumble as his trajectory carried him out of the slums. He thrust gently, turning, and settled to the regolith. A few skates, too weak or worn to work, saw him land, but did not move. They surely took him for some wayward tax farmer.

Even this far away, Diviya heard the panicked electrical sputtering of terrified skates. Friends and brothers. But the commands of the hive drones were louder, more calm, angry, and organized. Crackles of electrical static shot orders, some encoded. Abhisri was right. This was big.

"Flee!" his soul said stridently. "Flee!"

Diviya rocked back and forth on his fingers. He itched to run. To help. To run. His thoughts were jumbled. He feared he would only think of the right thing to do when it was too late. And he feared the sure beating. The work farms. The amputation of his soul. The true darkness of being a worker again, detached from a whole world he could only perceive through his soul.

Present

They thrust hard. The princess flew close. Hot violet radiation bathed them as the hunger of the Maw's gravity sped them faster. They fell from heaven, like the Hero himself. The whole world shifted into the blue. The sounds of static came tight and high-pitched. Tense. Near the Maw, space itself feared, releasing ghostly sounds and strange discharges.

The searing cloud abraded Diviya. The keening of his soul heightened in pitch. Radiation and particle strikes corroded the little soul. It was not made to fly this close to the Maw. It was composed of so many different radioisotopes that no matter what

struck it, some part of it changed to something inert or something inappropriately active. The soul was going mad.

They neared perigee. Their speed was terrifying. Stars multiplied, filling the sky. Their haunting chorus blended with the relentless screams of the souls.

"Pray!" Diviya yelled to the souls. "Pray!" They did. In warbling tones of panic, the souls recited the metronomic cadences of the liturgy. Diviya listened to the prayers as he never had before.

Diviya's carapace creaked. He was so close to the edge of the Maw that the difference in gravity from his ventral side to his dorsal threatened to crack him. And still the Maw accelerated him.

No sounds of the living world remained, except for the chanting of his soul, a simple prayer to a hero who had no authority here. A new, eerie ocean of slow echoes filled his senses. His stars, radiant microwave stars, were all gone. New stars appeared. They were dead, their glows constant and unblinking as the sleet of passing clouds flayed and scorched him. He counted time by the cadences of the souls' prayers.

The intensity of the radioactive hail burned his soul, making Diviya's exhaust so hot that it felt like riding a star. And the clay wafers that he carried, his gametic contribution to the future, hardened in the heat and pressure, forming the crystalline structures that could be laid over the wafers carried by the princess. The possibility of new life quickened in this crushing furnace. Diviya counted the prayers and then, at a precise moment, he redoubled his thrust.

Diviya could not hear the princess. He stayed fixed on the strange stars. If he looked back for her, they would both be lost. Among these ghost stars, he could only trust. If she had not been able to follow, everything they had suffered at home was for naught.

The Maw grasped at him, to crush, stretch, and snap him. The heat of Diviya's thrust burned his own carapace. The clouds of hot gas brightened. He became so fast that even the ghost stars became too blue to see. The acidic particles shooting at the Maw crowded out the darkness, filling Diviya's world.

Then the Maw flung Diviya away.

The clouds thinned, but did not cool. Each grain floating in his path zipped into his carapace at nearly the speed of light. The world was eerie. He had left the Maw, but not the land of the dead. Strange purple colors and warped, fluid sounds drifted past him. He was a ghost and the living world had closed itself to him.

Yet amidst this dislocation, far away, faint, a point pulsed, frenetically like a young pulsar. Its microwaves were blue-shifted to a pitch that was visible instead of audible. The world was covered in a cloak of strangeness, yet he had to have faith that this was the Hero, summoning him back from death.

He was far from home, and had only whispers of breath left. He had used everything in the slingshot passage around the Maw and he did not even know if he had succeeded in leading the princess.

He exhaled the tiniest gasp of breath. Achingly slow, he pivoted. And his heart grew, in a primal way. A few body lengths from him was the princess. He had led her into the land of death and past the Maw. They could see the world of life, even if they were still fast-moving ghosts. It would take weeks to slow down. Her sleek carapace was striped and pitted with fine burns. Her soul was bright, but quiet and reverent.

Beyond her, the great bulk of the Maw had begun to shroud itself again under layers of bright, doomed clouds. The gases in palliative spirals spit hard radiation, but now that they had passed the Maw, their spite was thin and reddened and sepulchral.

The king of the underworld receded majestically. In the last moments of that hypnotic view, Diviya saw a tiny, distant silhouette, carrying a point of hard, hot radioisotopes.

No.

No. No. No.

The Maw had scarred them as they passed, and had not let them truly escape. The Maw let through one of its own, an engine of death, a famished monster that had nothing to eat but Diviya and the princess.

Past

Diviya had ceased to sympathize with his soul. In the beginning, he understood it as a gift from the Hero and the queen, as a guide for the migration. The soul was, in some ways, an alien presence, but partly comprehensible within its role as the voice of eternity. But it was pitiless. Petty. Commitment became inflexibility. Resolve turned to stubbornness. Morality deafened reason. Diviya's soul argued, becoming more shrill. It was difficult to ignore the voice in his head.

In part to draw the soul away from its recriminations, Diviya spoke to his soul about the migration. Skates were taught nothing of the migration. This was safer ground to till. His soul calmed while considering the migration. Perhaps it thought that Diviya was opening himself to redemption.

At first petulantly, then with increasing enthusiasm, the soul spoke to Diviya of what was to come. Even when Diviya probed at the mystery of time dilation itself, the speeds and accelerations needed to achieve the magical dilation of seventeen, his soul answered him. Some of the pieces were symbols, or worse yet, allegories Diviya had to suffer through to keep his soul talking. More useful were the liturgies containing mathematical proportions, and angles and curves. Diviya read meaning into the liturgies that perhaps his soul did not mean for him to understand.

On the third day, Diviya descended from the mound. He left the slums and hopped into the worker districts where tailing hills were evenly rowed and the workers were healthier, younger. The neighborhood seemed lonely. This was a rest period, so most workers should have been back. In the distance, he saw the shine of another soul and turned away, so as not to give himself away. Between dusty piles he recognized a worker.

"Tejas!" he said.

Tejas approached. He had new scratches on the tops of his fins. Chips were missing along his leading edges. "Diviya," he whispered. "I thought you'd been arrested."

"Abhisri got me out a back alley. What happened?"

Tejas had difficulty speaking. The sparks he made were mistimed and sometimes sputtering. "We were all beaten. Most were arrested. I thought they were going to crack me."

Diviya's strength left him. "What charges?"

"I don't know," Tejas whispered. "They're all being sent to work farm number seven."

Dwani's broken face stared out of memory. Tejas sputtered and shorted over his words. "Abhisri got it bad, Diviya. They took out his soul right there. They weren't careful. I don't think he made it."

Diviya sank into the packed regolith. Adding or removing a soul was dangerous. Diviya had done it many times, but had not always been successful. The radioactive souls heated the ceramics and metals of the carapace and the neural wiring, while the skates cooled the souls. Sometimes the stresses on the skate and on the soul were too much. Tejas neared.

"They told me he didn't say nothing to the interrogators, but his soul did. They're looking for you, Diviya. You've got to hide."

"I told you!" Diviya's soul said. "Turn yourself in! Name names!"

But Diviya's soul had no hold on him anymore. The crushing pressure of the hive and his soul had crystallized a sense of mission in him. They had hardened his wavering resolve into the seed of something much more permanent. He was deathly frightened of being cracked open like Dwani, of having his soul torn away, but he heard the sagas through Dwani's eyes now.

"I'll hide in the slums, Tejas," Diviya said, "where the broken workers lie. Send me the leaders, yourself included."

"I'm no leader. I wasn't even a committee member."

"We're all committee members now," Diviya said. "The revolution must begin. Not the one Dwani and Abhisri wanted, but a larger one."

Present

Diviya and the princess had little with which to escape the shaghāl. Diviya had intended to unfurl his sail to brake beyond the black hole, but that would do nothing more than bring the fast-moving shaghāl to them faster. They flew so quickly that the gulf between the Maw and the Hero, that had taken the migration many months to cross before, now took only days. Yet if they did not slow soon, they would overshoot their home.

They unfurled their sails together. Blue-shifted radio waves punched their sails and the shock of slowing dizzied. As the tremendous deceleration intensified and the Hero fed them, they became less ghostly. The world abandoned its frenetic blue-shift. Strange stars faded, their haunted voices quieting. Stars he knew began to shine as if just reborn and the Hero's Voice aged centuries every minute, slowing finally to two flashes per second. Diviya and the princess were reborn.

"We will find a way to survive," the princess said.

No. Not princess. She was the queen now. But no. Not that either. No queens after the revolution. No princes. No grand princes. Just skates, sharing what they had.

"Yes, we will."

His words felt false. If they overshot their home, deep, deep space was a different kind of death than being crushed by the Maw.

"I will try to shadow the shaghāl," Diviya said.

"That will bring it to us faster!"

"Yes," Diviya said. Diviya adjusted his path, spotting the shaghāl's soul, as it shone in faintly blue-shifted hunger, far distant. "It will be ravenous now, and desperate."

Far behind, but still close enough to chill Diviya's marrow, a great radio sail unfurled. Diviya would make a poor shadow. The shaghāl was close and closing, decelerating at a furious rate.

Diviya slipped into the path of the pulsar's beam, cutting a shadow in the center of the shaghāl's sail. The shadow grew as the shaghāl neared. The shaghāl seemed to realize what was happening and angled its sail to escape the shadowing. Diviya followed. The shaghāl jerked its sail the other way. It had no experience in avoiding a shadow. It hurtled closer, unable to do more than edge slowly sideways. The shaghāl tilted its sail wildly, trying to get around Diviya.

Diviya jerked his sail opposite to the shaghāl's tilt. The Hero's Voice veered Diviya aside, but not fast enough. The shaghāl's wing tip struck Diviya. The knock was tremendous, accompanied by a snap.

Diviya spun. Pain. Sharp pain. And fear and screaming. The second soul nearly flew from Diviya's mouth. Diviya righted his sail, catching the Hero's Voice, slowing his spin. Finally, he controlled his spin.

The shaghāl plunged far ahead, toward the asteroid field. It was slowing, but Di-

viya had robbed it of time. Now it would need every bit of effort to avoid overshooting the asteroid field.

The ragged princess neared. Diviya felt strange. His sail still pulled oddly, producing an ache under him.

"Your soul is glowing through a long crack beneath you," she said. The rhythms of her sparking speech were quick, fearful. He feared, too.

Cracked. He was cracked. Dwani's broken face haunted his thoughts. Dust would get into his carapace and would scour his wiring and joints. Soon, he would only be good for resting on mounds.

"You will survive," she said. "We will survive. You will make a magnificent grand prince."

His soul, and the stolen one, made sounds of relief. The princess had accepted him as her mate. Despite his crimes and the hardships of the migration, the souls sounded guardedly elated. A new hive. His hive. Grand prince. Diviya would be the father of a new generation, one that, due to the separation of time dilation, would never see any skates from another colony. And his colony would have no landlords, no tax collectors, and no beatings.

Past

Furtively, workers came to Diviya in the slums, atop his mound. Most had never been unionists. Diviya recognized his old fear in them. They came to speak to Diviya about the massacre. Few had been there, but they knew the workers who had been killed, and the workers who had been exiled to the work farms. They came as cowards might, shamefully, weighed by the guilt that they were happy not to have been there.

The idea of sacrifice in them was strong, as it was in Diviya. The Hero had built them to sacrifice for each other, for kin. They were pressed of the same clay. The success of a brother worker or a prince felt like a success for all of them. Demanding something for themselves was difficult. The newly ensouled like Diviya had to be taught selfishness, acquisitiveness by the souls. Yet these skates, who had not been brave enough to attend a union rally to help all of them, now slinked to the last committee leader, a skate who shared their guilt. They formed new committees.

"Tell them what to do," his soul said. "You are better than this rabble. Leverage your influence here for patronage. Deliver the malcontents to the hive. Give bribes."

Diviya had bribes. The workers smuggled innumerable tiny nuggets of frozen volatiles to him. This struggle with his soul could not go on.

And then, he saw it again.

In the distance, the brief, hot shine of a soul, looking this way. The sleet of radioactive particles stilled his soul. Diviya shut his eye, shuttering the emissions of his own soul.

"Open your eye!" his soul said.

"You can guess as well as I what that was," Diviya whispered.

Diviya's soul laughed. "More unionists have been picked up by hive drones," the soul guessed. "The rascals must have spoken of an ensouled committee member dispensing fratricidal treason from a mound in the slums."

"It is rich that you would call me fratricidal, when I have never hurt another skate, while the hive beats, imprisons, and kills my brothers," Diviya said.

"Your disloyalty endangers every skate and princess in the hive. Open your eye."

Diviya descended the mound with his eye closed. Tejas was with him, as were Barini and Ugra. They did not have souls and were accustomed to Diviya's silences while he communed with his own. With his eye closed, the world was dark, but loud.

filled with the Hero's Voice and the scraping vibration of his own movement. But in this way, he was invisible to the other ensouled skate in the slums.

"What are you doing, Diviya?" Tejas asked.

"An ensouled skate has been moving at the edge of the slums," Diviya said to Tejas. "I have seen him several times today. He is looking for something."

"Or someone," Tejas said.

"I saw only one skate. Perhaps an ambitious tax farmer seeks favor by catching a union leader."

"Hide!" Tejas said. "We must get you away."

"Me?" Diviya said.

"You're the key to the revolution," Tejas said. His voice was charged, tense. He believed what he was saying. And Diviya felt as he had when he'd first spoken at the rally. Exposed. Undeserving.

"Tejas, Barini, and Ugra," Diviya said, "lead me closer, so that we can see, but not be seen. You will need to be my eye."

"What are you doing?" his soul demanded.

Tejas walked Diviya on a winding, blind way around the tailing mounds.

The Hero was high in the sky, so none of the mounds cast shadows. Diviya heard the Hero's Voice change tone when they turned. Catching the subtleties in the polarization of the radio waves was a different way of experiencing the Hero, one perhaps more primal, and it calmed Diviya, as much as his new resolve.

Diviya was built for peace, but the princes, and those who spoke in their name, had taken matters too far for Diviya to stay still.

They were kin, pressed from the same clays, made to launch princesses and some males into the migration. Their success was his success, in the flat equations of biology, but skates had grown. They were no longer the primitives of the sagas. They reasoned. They were more than their instincts. They had grown past the need for souls to tell them how to treat each other. Souls created and perpetuated divisions in the hive. Princes. Landlords. Workers. But the skates carried their own blame for taking what was given to them, as blindly as Diviya was being led through the slums. The souls had their own interests. Not least Diviya's soul.

Brother and enemy. Family and opponent.

Diviya's steel fingers sunk into the thick regolith. Pebbles and larger fragments of iron-nickel and hard, volatile-dry silicates were so numerous and uneven as to be stumbled over, especially blind. The four of them walked and hopped. From a distance, they would just be four soulless workers.

"He is to our left now," Tejas whispered.

"Take me onto a mound," Diviya said.

Tejas led Diviya scrabbling to the top of the hillock.

"What are you doing? Open your eye!" his soul said.

"Is he facing us?" Diviya asked.

"No," Tejas said. "We are facing north. He is facing west."

The revolution needed to happen. Working with the souls as they had was no longer possible. Diviya lifted a large chunk of iron-nickel in his fingers. He snapped his eye open and thrust, hurling himself toward the ensouled skate.

"You are wasting breath!" his soul shrieked. "Stop! Stop!"

Diviya released the iron-nickel chunk as he flew past, as a hive drone would have. It crashed into the other skate with such force that ceramic chips rattled against Diviya's underside.

"Murderer," his soul whispered.

Diviya puffed breath sideways to spin, and then thrust to a stop and landed. He hopped to the ensouled skate. His three fellows were already there.

Diviya's attack had struck the skate's left leading edge, near the eye. A gaping hole exposed the hot soul beneath.

"You are beyond redemption," his soul said. "I will not rest until justice is done."

"I know," Diviya said.

Diviya removed medical pliers and a small pry from his gullet. Dust caked them. He had been ensouled to help skates, to mend their minor wounds, to make them well enough to get back to the mines and farms. The hive had taught him anatomy and science for a skill he hadn't practiced in weeks.

"Do not touch that soul!" his soul said. Both Diviya and his soul could plainly hear the electrical panic of the soul in the fallen skate. "Report this to the hive! No one may touch a soul without the authorization of the princes."

Diviya reached into the corpse, prying away the bands around the soul. He lifted it gently, leaving the inside of the carcass warm and hollow.

"No!" his soul said.

"You must be destroyed, Diviya!" the soul said. "You are the most vile criminal ever fired in the hive."

Diviya reached into his own gullet with his pliers. Diviya's own soul screamed as he pried it loose and pulled it from his mouth.

And then, Diviya was a worker again, for the first time in a long time. He had no sensitivity to most of the wavelengths of radiation and energetic particles. The world was quiet and cold. The stars were colorless. The souls before him were gray lumps, hotter than the regolith, but otherwise unremarkable.

Diviya set his soul in the cold, dry dirt. The temperature stresses crackled in the radio bands. He put the other soul carefully in his mouth and onto the mounting. As Diviya lowered the bands to hold it into place and clipped it tight, the beauty of the spiritual world washed back in. And he was himself.

The new soul spoke immediately, more timidly than Diviya's soul. "What are you doing?" it whispered.

"Do not leave me here!" his old soul cried from the cold regolith. "Summon the hive!"

Diviya took his own soul in his fingers and inserted it into his gullet where its shine would not show.

"Bury the body," Diviya said to his co-conspirators. "When it is completely frozen, we will take whatever volatiles it may have."

Diviya launched himself from the surface of the asteroid. It did not take much breath. The microgravity of the asteroid barely pulled the dust back to the surface. As the hive receded, he exhaled again and sailed away from his home and from the Hero.

His former soul was apoplectic.

"I might have migrated with you," Diviya said to his soul. "I had even thought of putting you into another worker, for the revolution, for more workers to migrate." Diviya removed the soul from his mouth. "But you are too dangerous, too intransigent, too willing to stamp upon workers with my fingers."

His soul was incandescent in its anger, fear, and hate. Diviya released it. For a time, they drifted away from the asteroid, traveling the same path. Then Diviya turned back to the Hero and thrust back toward the hive. His soul continued out into the cold of space.

Present

Their new hive would need an asteroid in the gravitational stillness behind the Hero's Voice, preferably a slow-turning one, so that they could walk around it, always

under the radiance of the pulsar, and one that was freshly cracked by an impact or one whose radioisotopes and volatiles had not been harvested in centuries. There were thousands of asteroids in the archipelago, but not so many that a single, determined shaghāl could not find a hive eventually.

In some sagas, princes and princesses made a second migration, right after the first, to escape from shaghāl following too closely. But Diviya and the princess were exhausted. Little breath remained to them and with his cracks, Diviya could never again survive the crush of the Maw.

Diviya and the princess retracted their sails from time to time to drift silently and listen for the shaghāl. They could not hear him, but he could not be that far. He might already have ended his careening deceleration and be waiting even now in the archipelago of asteroids. Diviya spread his sail, and the Hero's Voice pushed him outward.

"How much breath do you suppose you have left?" Diviya asked.

"I did not use all of it."

Diviya explained his plan as he turned away from the Hero. He disgorged the soul he'd taken from the murdered prince and held it in his shadow. It shrieked. His own soul cried out. The princess' soul made a sound of revulsion. A soul was an ugly thing, a complex, layered brick of radioisotopes, humming with its own heat and shining with hard radiation. That light would draw the shaghāl as soon as Diviya revealed the soul to the asteroid field.

"This will not work!" the princess said. What Diviya asked was dangerous, perhaps impossible, but it was their only chance. "I do not even have the strength you want!"

"It is this or nothing, Princess! This is all we have. A strong, fast, hungry shaghāl lurks somewhere in the archipelago. While he is here, no hive is safe."

They moved farther and farther from the Hero, into an orbit where they would intersect the archipelago of asteroids at its outer edge, far from the best fields. They slowed over hours, risking creating radio reflections with their sails. The shaghāl would be closer to the pulsar, where the voice of the Hero would feed it and drown out their echoes. Every so often, Diviya turned toward the Hero, exposing the second soul. The soul's sharp, multi-rayed brightness would be very visible from far away. Then Diviya would turn back, hiding it again for a while, before exposing it once more.

Bait.

Finally, an angry glare answered. The hot harsh light of the shaghāl's soul was much closer to the pulsar. It made for them. Diviya held the second soul visible, letting the shaghāl see their trajectory. Then, he hid the soul from the shaghāl's sight.

The asteroids neared, including a large, uneven ovoid, pocked with craters.

The princess took the wires of Diviya's sail in her steel fingers. They passed into the shadow of the asteroid, and out of sight, and Diviya released the second soul. The princess thrust, decelerating them. The soul hurtled onward, screaming. The tremendous deceleration bent Diviya's sail, and stabbed new pain into his underside. Diviya and the princess both groaned, sharing the pain of the unnatural maneuver.

Her thrust flagged.

She had almost no breath left and they would soon emerge from the shadow of the asteroid. But the soul was not far enough away.

"Don't stop!" he said.

"There is nothing more!"

"Then turn!" he said. "Into the asteroid!"

"We'll crash!"

They still traveled very fast. The regolith might be composed of deep powdered grains or it might hide nuggets and boulders of nickel-iron and hard ices that would shatter their carapaces.

"You are brave!" Diviya said. "It is the only way, Princess!" She did not turn. He waited. The thrust sputtered. "Please!"

The wires tightened and swung him as she aimed at the asteroid. They lurched as her breath expired. The regolith, even under microgravity, was frightening at their speed.

Diviya plunged deep in an explosion of dust, tumbling in the powder and pebbles, before being wrenched to the surface in a jarring, snapping stop.

He was on his back. His underside hurt. He could not feel his sail. Some of his fingers were bent. He wiggled them and began digging at the dust until he was right side up. A deep channel gouged the asteroid. Dust rose, swirling on its own static.

The princess had not let go of him. They had plowed the great furrow together before she herself had been driven by their speed into the regolith. She pulled herself free of the dirt. She had filled herself with dust, as had he. His insides. Her insides. Their souls were covered and, for once, silent. They spewed regolith, thickening the rising clouds.

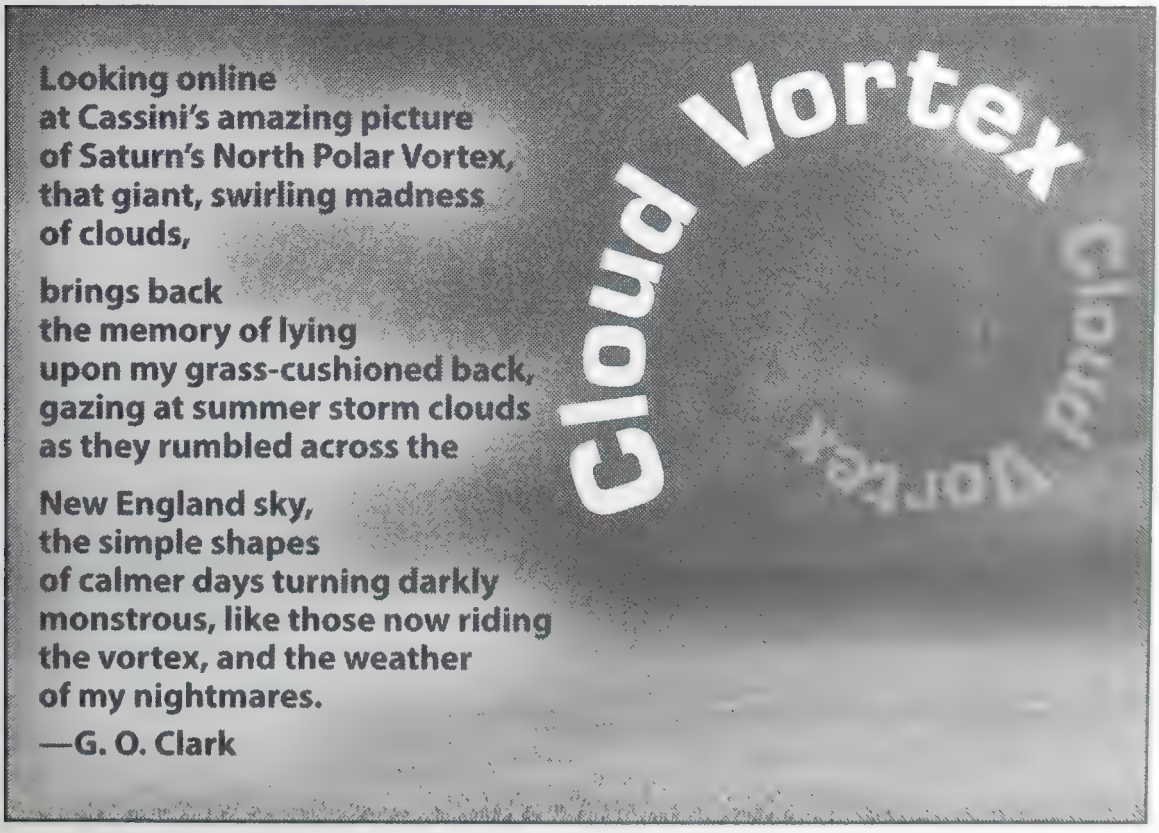
"You did it, Princess," he said. "You stopped us. You are a hero."

She spat another gout of dirt from her gullet. Her anger and fear still crackled.

"Look!" Diviya said. The princess followed the line of his gaze.

Far in the distance, just a point now, the second soul sped onward, on a trajectory that would take it past the gravitational eddy and back toward the pulsar. From this distance, it looked like a tiny part of a distant migration.

On a course to intercept it, thrusting hot gas, was another sharp point of radiation: the shaghāl. By the time it realized what it was chasing, the shaghāl would be committed to a trajectory that would take it all the way around the black hole. It would be years before it returned. In that time, the new hive would have risen and matured and launched its own migration into the future. ❍



Maggie Shen King's first book *Fortune's Fools*—an account of the ethical dilemmas, larger-than-life personalities, and political intrigue encountered by a Taiwanese manufacturer in China—was a semi-finalist and Second Prize winner in the 2012 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. The author's stories have appeared in *ZYZZYVA* and *Fourteen Hills*. When she is not writing, Maggie likes to work on her golf game and her roses. She welcomes your comments at *maggie.shen.king@gmail.com*. Maggie's first story for us is set in the same milieu as her next novel. Sixty years after China instituted the one-child policy, the population of eligible men outnumbers women by fifty million. As he interviews with a potential wife, a forty-year-old man and his matchmaker are forced to do the math. . . .

BALL AND CHAIN

Maggie Shen King

My gaze is drawn again and again to the delicious swell of Wu May-ling's breasts. For a slender little thing, she is incongruously buxom. And not in an over-cooked or matronly sort of way either. A thrilling high-wire act, hers demand—no, command—a man's attention, his loyalty. Someone clears his throat, and I jerk up to see both my dads glaring at me.

Dad—Mom's second husband and my Biological—says, "Our Wei-guo has impeccable health habits. He weight trains three times a week and swims and runs as well." He bestows a fatherly smile upon May-ling, our matchmaking lunch's guest of honor and my potential bride. "He can bench a hundred kilos. You should see his biceps."

Sitting on my other side, Big Dad stiffens. "You're embarrassing our guests," he says to Dad with forced levity. With both hands, he offers up the ribbon- and lace-adorned tin of individually wrapped cookies Dad spent hours choosing.

We have honored MaMa's dying wish, remaining under one roof as a family. These days, she seems to speak through Dad. My two fathers sound more and more like man and wife. They've taken to wearing the same shirts, both pouncing upon whatever happens to be clean. Even their increasingly paunched and stooped silhouettes look alike.

May-ling beams at the gift, the twinkle in her eyes one of boisterous good humor. "I have a very sweet tooth. Thank you very much." Her smoky eyes and translucent silk dress could not be a more enticing blend of intrigue and class. Despite having birthed a child, her manners and air are girlish, a primed canvas awaiting defining strokes of paint.

Her second husband, the security designer, takes the tin from her and, scrunching his nose, tosses it on the floor. If I did not know from his wrinkled shirt and uncombed grey hair that he is not in favor of Family Advancement, I do now. Ironic that a man with such disregard for social niceties should possess so cherubic a face.

Dad continues, "Wei-guo has won three triathlons, the five- and ten-thousand-meter races more times than we can remember. He'll be thrilled to give all three of you a free assessment. Put you on a diet—" I squeeze his knee. He doesn't know when to stop.

Sitting half a head taller than everyone at the table, May-ling's first husband. a corporate accountant, doesn't react even though he is in obvious need of a weight gain plan. With a body mass index the low side of normal, he could be easily felled by illness. He seems to be the Alpha, the way he sits there with his arms crossed in judgment, waiting to be buttered up. Too important, even, to eat. I've yet to see a better-fitted suit on a man. A linen hanky in his jacket pocket, a watch fob hanging from his vest, and his silvery hair slicked back, he seems from another more genteel era.

Hero, our matchmaker flicks his wrist at May-ling, three chunky rings glittering on his restless hand. "Lee Wei-guo was voted a top master personal trainer in Beijing the last five years in a row by *The Worldly Bachelor*." Except for the fact that this same website ranked our matchmaker highest in client placement, we would not have hired him. The volume and frizz of his shoulder-length hair bring to mind disorder, unlikeliness, and bad judgment. We pray his name is a good description of his abilities and remind ourselves that this is a profession dominated by the Willfully Sterile.

Our matchmaker is trying to help, but mention of *The Worldly Bachelor* only reminds everyone that I'm in my forties and entering matchmaking talks for the first time. Not only that, but my living relies on excess, unmarriageable men. The government has even awarded us official status, investing in a public campaign to make the phrase "leftover men" unpatriotic and backward. For "The Bounty," fitness programs are state-funded and mandated. The distraction and physical exhaustion of a thoughtful exercise plan are as non-negotiable for us as sleep, food, and drink.

Husband Two seems oblivious to the conversation, above it even, focusing solely on shoveling down all the soupy dumplings on the table. He must think his fat ass is a status symbol.

"I don't like to brag," Dad says, "but Wei-guo really is the best in his field."

I didn't expect Wu May-ling to catch my eye and smile. Before anyone else notices, she returns to sipping the coveted shark's fin soup. Paying into the Nature Preservation Fund so that endangered species can be brought to the table signals serious interest. Now that it has become customary for the bride's side to propose matchmaking talks and marriage, my dads dare not spare any expense.

May-ling's first husband finally deigns to open his mouth, "Comrade Lee."

"Please call him Wei-guo," Dad says.

Husband One starts over with my given name. He asks how long I've been a master trainer, what direction I hope to take my career.

"Our son earned his certification more than twenty years ago. Before he'd even graduated high school. He broke the program's record, too, completing it in just under ten days."

Big Dad frowns at Dad. "Please let our boy talk."

Wu May-ling makes eye contact again and smiles in commiseration. I like her. It can't be much fun married to these two grandpas. I wonder whose idea it was to Advance their family, to go the max.

I look only at her when I speak. "I cut my teeth on our city's elite at The Body Essential." Everyone who is anyone knows The Body Essential—the owner's father (and financial backer) is a ranking member of the Politburo—but Husband One shows no sign of recognition. "Those same clients followed me to my own studio eight years ago. My hourly rate rivals that of actuaries." At this, he raises an eyebrow.

I continue, "For my clients' convenience, I work early mornings and evenings, but my schedule is at my own discretion." Wu May-ling's eyes twinkle, and I imagine us with the daylight hours all to ourselves. Strolling the streets together. Eating in bed. Rollicking.

Husband One asks again about my career ambitions.

"I like where I am right now. I've worked very hard to get here." I stare deep into Wu May-ling's eyes. "I want a very special woman. A true love. A soul mate. A play pal." I infuse extra meaning into the word play.

Big Dad shifts in his chair. "Wei-guo continually updates his program, his equipment, his facility. He's always innovating so as to maintain competitive advantage."

Husband One crosses his arms. "I hope you don't mind me asking. Why not go to Cambodia, Burma, or on some marriage cruise, and bring back a spouse? Why share?"

Big Dad answers again, "Wei-guo understands Advanced families. That's how he grew up. That's what he knows. Like his father and me, he values literacy, shared culture and beliefs, and the preservation of our people." In private, Big Dad liked to contend that it took, at the very least, two husbands in friendly competition to keep up with MaMa and her chatter.

"Yes," Dad says, "we are staunch supporters of China First."

Husband One looks to me for confirmation, but I don't react. I'll worry about the dilution of our blood or the increasing complexity of our society after our society solves my problem. In truth, I've grown weary of my weekly ten-minute hygiene session with my assigned comfort lady, but not weary enough yet to trudge overseas and cast my lot with a sign-language wife.

Husband One asks how I like to spend my free time.

Dad says, "Wei-guo is the founding general of his battalion. He serves on the Strategic Games Council."

The razor clam at the end of Husband Two's chopsticks stops halfway to his mouth. He comes alive. "I've amassed 5,468,325 krps in Metagalactic Domination. I am Emperor Divine of Omega Centauri, Superior Warlord on Andromeda Magellanic Cloud, Eunuch General on Messier 83, Minister of Justice on ESO 137-001 . . ."

I find myself drifting as he drones on about his virtual rankings. Big Dad's glance darts from Husband One to Two to May-ling. Head down, she is now the one who cannot stop eating. Husband One nods along, the smile on his face an upturned grimace. He is perhaps as much pained by his counterpart's ramblings as by my military games. Ever my biggest fan, Dad forgets that much of the public believe that our nighttime exercises in parks and open spaces promote, rather than deter violence.

When Husband Two finally takes a breath, Big Dad seizes the moment. "Forming the battalion was a continuation of Wei-guo's conscription. He puts in his time now on the governing board, heading up the commission on safety. I'd say he spends most weekends on his bike with his Little Brother—he is a volunteer mentor—training for the Beijing Youth Cup." Husband Two seems content to return to picking out clam meat.

"That's terrific," Wu May-ling says to me. I think it's terrific, too, the way she is trying to forge a connection.

I ask how she likes to spend her free time.

She glances at Husband One as if checking with him. "Before BeiBei came along, I loved to salsa and merengue."

I am immediately transported to her virginal youth. To her pulsing hips. I've long dreamt of a cosmopolitan spouse.

Big Dad says, "I understand you have just one child."

She flinches, and I hold onto her eyes with mine. My gaze tells her that I am on

her side, that I do not want to find their situation odd. Every man is allowed one child, and negotiating the size of the dowry refund and the option of a dissolution if a baby is not born within three years is the matchmaker's number one order of business. After six years of marriage, May-ling should have two kids.

Husband One replies, "Our son just turned one. We're planning a three-year spacing between children."

Big Dad addresses May-ling again, "May I ask—I hope you don't mind my asking—have you ever used an infertility specialist?"

Husband One covers May-ling's chopstick hand, but just as quickly snatches it back and checks my reaction. "May-ling is only twenty-four."

"The oldest child is yours?" I wish Big Dad would quit.

"Our son belongs to all of us." Husband One sits up even taller. "And, no, we do not believe in sex selection."

"Nor do we," Dad pipes up. That is, of course, everybody's party line these days, but there's no denying the unnatural number of males in our two units.

"We are a true family in name and deed," says Husband One. "Our son takes the Wu surname as will all our future children."

My two dads' eyebrows shoot up together. In order to promote female births, the adoption of maternal surnames will become official in another year, and the birth rate has skyrocketed in anticipation. Supporters of China First fear that over time, the law will send more men overseas for wives and births, undoing all the gains made by ten years of tax breaks for Advanced families. Big Dad asks why they want to add a spouse.

"We believe in sharing both our country's wealth and pain. Should it become necessary for our government to raise the unit spousal limit, know that we are prepared to go the max again and make that sacrifice."

May-ling starts at Husband One's proclamation. Drops of tea blaze a dark trail down her silky peaks. My fathers are at a loss for words. The large bamboo steamer of dumplings, which Husband Two failed to pass, sits empty. He eyes the steamed hairy crab, no doubt wishing for a lazy Susan rather than the intimacy of this smaller table.

"Every unit has its quirks, so let's not waste more time discussing our bad habits." Husband One promises that our matchmaker will satisfy all our questions later. "Today, I am most interested in getting to know Wei-guo. To see if a rapport exists."

May-ling's gaze snaps up. She stops dabbing at her cleavage. We find each other and grin.

"Absolutely not," Big Dad says the moment May-ling and her two husbands step out of earshot toward the restaurant's door.

"I like her," I reply, my heart still thumping from the thrill of her hand in mine. I feel as if I'm in grade school again the way she secretly pressed her phone number into my palm. "She's charming."

"She's a minx is what she is," Big Dad declares. I wipe his wayward spit from my nose.

On my other side, Dad's face is dark with concern. "I bet your Big Dad is right: Wu May-ling is barren."

Hero points out that they have a child. "I guarantee that she's fertile."

I say, "If anyone can't have kids, it's Husband One."

Dad pats my hand and reminds me that this is our very first match.

Big Dad adds, "There're more pretty girls than one."

No one seems to want to acknowledge the scarcity of brides. After we saved the requisite two million *yuans* needed to enter into matchmaking talks, it has taken another eight months for me to get this nibble.

"You're her first as well." The matchmaker says that Wu May-ling just came on the market. "She picked your picture out of about three hundred."

My heart does a little jig. Big Dad sneers.

The matchmaker fluffs his hair. "I didn't want to color your judgment with talk of money. This is, after all, a marriage. A lifetime commitment." He reveals that they're only asking a million nine in dowry. "I found you an amazing deal. The best one around."

"A good deal is the farthest thing from our minds." Big Dad is touchy on the subject of money. A man who loves tax savings more than his own dick is the public's favorite stereotype of the Advanced male. "What's the catch?"

"They want an honest man. Somebody they all like." He explains that the threesome is going the max because they have their eye on a new home, a three-bedroom apartment. "I'm not supposed to tell you this: Wei-guo's name will be on the deed."

Big Dad raises an eyebrow. "Like I said, what's the catch?"

"Did I mention that the two husbands are brothers?"

"Is this a joke?" Dad says. "Wei-guo will be forever outvoted. What century do they think they're living in anyways? Brothers sharing a wife."

Those brothers seem an equal and opposite reaction to the other. I don't sense much rapport.

Dad stares at the matchmaker. "That second husband is kind of an interesting fellow."

"He's a very good engineer." Hero cannot stop twirling the jade ring on his index finger. "You already know about the maternal surname. Also, they want me to stress that they are a true family, that the children belong to all the fathers."

"Of course," Dad says. "We believe the very same."

"Let him finish," Big Dad tells Dad.

"They don't assign nights. May-ling chooses who gets bedroom time."

A smile takes over my face. I can already see her picking me over Laurel and Hardy.

"That's outrageous," Big Dad says. Mom kept a strict bedroom schedule, as do most Advanced families. She used to spend every other week with each of my dads, but they eventually talked her into alternating nights. The sex aside, too much advantage and intimacy got lost over seven days.

"They believe in the equality of all members. As the most junior spouse, Wei-guo will undoubtedly benefit from such thoughtfulness."

"How do we know for sure then if a child is ours?" Dad asks.

"That's the point," the matchmaker says. "They are all yours."

Big Dad grimaces.

Dad's eyebrows are almost at his hairline.

Hero bows his head. "I understand your concern." He promises to speak again with May-ling's husbands.

"This is not a marriage," Big Dad says.

On the contrary, I want to say, it's better. I welcome this chance to win with my wits, my looks, my sperm. I know I don't want the clinical tedium of weekly hygiene appointments for the rest of my life.

The matchmaker leans forward. "I know those folks, and I wouldn't propose them to you if I didn't think that Wei-guo has a very good chance at becoming May-ling's favorite."

Dad says, "That's too much pressure. Marriage should be a sanctuary, not a popularity contest."

Hero puts one hand over the other and bows with the daintiness of a courtesan. "You are right, of course. I wanted you to have a shot at May-ling 'cause she'll be snapped up by next week—" He waves dismissively. Not only will he continue to market me aggressively, he will re-feature me as the bachelor of the week.

"Will they allow a compatibility test?" Big Dad says.

The matchmaker starts. "You want me to ask?" A perogative of the bride. Compatibility Tests are more myth than reality.

I close my fingers around the twice-folded slip of paper in my pocket and make a non-committal hum. I don't want anyone's help getting May-ling into bed. Furthermore, there's no need to rile up the dads until I am certain I want her.

The matchmaker asks if my STD panels are up to date. They are requiring a genetic disease profile and tax returns for the last three years as well as bank statements. "They also want an intelligence test."

He sweeps our faces for reactions. "If you are interested."

He fears that my IQ is a deal breaker.

I dial up May-ling the next morning.

"I was hoping you'd call," she says. Dots of color scintillate on the screen and coalesce into her face. I forgot how her eyes dance.

I dim the lights and back up a bit before I activate the video cam. "I liked meeting you yesterday," I whisper.

"I liked meeting you as well," she whispers back.

I tell her that I want to show her my studio tomorrow.

"Yeah?" If she does not bring up her husbands' dating rules, I'll know we have something.

"I'll pick you up at eleven?"

"I can be at your studio at eleven."

"Do you drive?" She would be safe to come alone, locked inside a car.

"Don't you worry."

"All right then," I say. "I won't worry."

I drink in May-ling's flirtatious smile and wait for her to be the first to hang up.

I go beyond my usual vacuuming and trash-emptying routines to eradicate the kind of grime my mother would have noticed. I wipe down, disinfect, and reorganize all the free weights. I dust and shine every machine, every ball, every flexibility strap. I spend nearly two hours wiping the dust, fingerprints, and streaks off the mirror walls. I go through an entire roll of tape ridding the dark floor mat of lint.

At home, I bone up at matchmaking sites. Bathe. Arrive on Time. Be a Gentleman. Compliment. I find the tips elementary until this: Learn to dance. If your woman is out on the floor with someone else, you might as well not exist. I imagine the husbands left in the dust while May-ling and I shimmy, twist, and twirl together, communicating with our bodies our horizontal desires. I spend the rest of the evening studying up on salsa and merengue, listening to, downloading, and organizing music.

A fourteen-piece orchestra will infuse my studio with sexy, hip-shaking rhythm when May-ling arrives. Casually clad in form-fitting black tee and my shortest shorts, I will give her a hands-on tour of my facility. I will assess her flexibility, her muscular strength and endurance, her cardiovascular capacity. I will coach her through the use of my equipment. My wit, my charm, my virility will remind her of everything her husbands are not.

Our last stop will be my basketball court/movement studio. A catered Cuban lunch will await there as well as mojitos, which I will personally mix. I will tell May-ling that it is her turn to coach me. Though I've studied the steps online, I will play the uncertain, but ultimately brilliant student.

Murmuring repeated apologies, May-ling stumbles into my studio a half hour late, a sleeping child on one shoulder and a large bag hanging off the other. Her hair is up

in a ponytail, the loose pieces damp snakes plastered to her neck and forehead. Whitish curds mottle the front of her shapeless red top. Perspiration rings her armpits. This is not the date we agreed upon, but what can I do but be a gentleman.

She groans when I relieve her of her weights and whispers that she walked all the way here. BeiBei was up all night teething. He is a light sleeper, and getting into a car would have interrupted his much needed nap.

I cannot help noticing the echo of Husband Two in his extraordinarily big head. "You walked here alone?"

"Not alone," she said. "I had my little man."

"I can't believe your husbands let you out unescorted." Stories of women abducted and sold on the black market appear at least once a month in the news. Disgraced and discarded wives make up half of the squatters currently occupying Mao's Mausoleum. May-ling's flash of displeasure shuts me up.

"I need to go wash my hands." She transfers her baby onto my shoulder. "Would you mind watching him? I'll be fast."

Of course the boy starts whimpering that very second and arches off me toward his mother. She croons and kisses his cheek. He wraps his arms around her neck and pulls her breasts into my elbow. I freeze. She claims it always takes him a minute to wake up.

Shushing her boy, May-ling encircles us with her arms, puts her cheeks to his, and rocks. Soon, both their heads are on my shoulder. Jittery with excitement and dread, I'm coaxed into swaying with them. Their warmth melts into me, and this sustained, whole-body consciousness of another is not something I know. I touch my head to May-ling's. When she does not flinch, I breathe in her scent of sweet ginger, of sweat, of soured milk. BeiBei is a ball of heat between us. My neck is sticky with his perspiration, but lulled and slightly euphoric, I hold on tight.

May-ling cups BeiBei's head with a hand. "Say hi."

He arches back to regard me and sticks his fingers in my mouth. Kissing him again, she tells BeiBei that MaMa is going to the bathroom. She smiles as she peels herself away and waves. "Be right back."

BeiBei's mouth turns down and quivers. His eyes pool. I, too, feel a measure of loss. We follow his mother out the studio and down the dark hallway.

His baby hand bangs on my mouth as he cries ba-ba. It sounds like he's calling me daddy.

"Be right baaaack," I correct him and shake my head like a New Year's dancing lion to make myself a more difficult target.

I don't know how much longer I can take his howling. He nearly pokes my eye out, and I chomp down on his fingers the next time his hand comes near. I flush when May-ling returns and finds my teeth clamped around her son's hand and him alternately wailing and calling me daddy.

"He likes you." She cuddles her child. "He calls everyone he likes BaBa."

BeiBei mouths his fingers and pouts at me from his motherly perch. When he mumbles ba-ba in between the sucking, she grins at me, delighted.

Back in my studio, BeiBei shrieks and covers his ears. His sneakered feet pound at his mother's stomach.

Cooing all the while, May-ling slips an arm below his knees and faces him away from her. She apologizes to me yet again. "I think it's the music."

He doesn't like music? It's not even loud.

"I think the beat is too agitating."

There goes all my planning. What can I do but turn off the merengue? I cross my arms and stand a distance away. I thought we had something, a special connection, the hots for each other even. I thought the two of us were in cahoots, securing a date

without going through the proper channels. It turns out she's the one who's pulled a fast one on me. May-ling has apologized repeatedly, but not once has she said sorry for bringing BeiBei.

He nearly falls out of her arms lunging for the ground. His squat legs motor toward the stability balls. He crashes into the largest one, knocking it off the rack. The thing is bigger than him.

"You found a purple ball!" May-ling claps as if he's managed the impossible. She touches my wrist and asks if it's all right for him to play with it.

Before I can answer, BeiBei pushes another off its perch. May-ling stops it from rolling away and asks what the balls are for.

"I'll show you." I set one behind me, rest a foot on it, and put my hands on the ground. There is an extremely difficult maneuver—the ball pike—that I planned on executing for her. Toes balanced on the ball, my toned ass up in the air, every muscle taut—it is a dazzling display of masculine strength.

I hear another ball thump to the floor, and May-ling stops watching me in order to corral it. She bounces the thing. "Let's play."

BeiBei does not listen. He goes for the kettlebell next. When it refuses to budge, he pulls with two hands and makes as if to sit down. My heart skips a beat as I tumble off my ball and lunge for the sixteen-kilo weight.

BeiBei sees my hand on his toy and starts bawling again. He pushes me away and tries again to dislodge it. I brace his back so he does not pull the weight on top of himself. On the rack, there are a half a dozen more kettlebells with which he can off himself. I lift him up, fly him through the air like an airplane. I even make the whooshing noises.

May-ling beams at us and spreads her arms to zoom alongside. "Isn't this fun?"

Eyes still wet, BeiBei looks alarmed, but game. We careen around the room, and he tries to grab the dangling lat pull-down bar. I allow him to bat it and hop back every time the bar swings at his face.

"You're good with kids," May-ling says.

Good at not allowing them to maim themselves on my turf. I wonder if all this is a test. I wonder, too, if I like her enough to go through the trouble of passing.

I say, "Why did you give me your number like that?"

That good-humored glint is back in her eyes. She cants a shoulder. "I like you."

BeiBei twists toward the ground, and I ease him down. He approaches a stack of weights, pushes his finger into their pin slots. I kneel next to him, pick up the chained pin, and show him how to slide it in.

I look up at May-ling. "You make up your mind awfully fast."

"I'm a very good judge of people."

I arch an eyebrow, not sure whether to be flattered or alarmed by her impulsivity.

"Really." She bugs her eyes out at me. "You glow green."

"What?"

"The air around you is green. It's kind of a halo effect. My favorite people—BeiBei, my best girlfriends—they're all green."

"You like people because of a color no one else sees?"

"It confirms what I feel in my gut. It's never wrong," she says. I've yet to see her this serious. "There's something between us. Tell me you don't feel it."

I feel lust is what I feel. I pull the pin out of BeiBei's mouth. "What do you see in me?"

She considers my question. "A kindred loneliness. A gentle heart." Her eyes zero in on me. "A false front."

I frown. "Is your second husband green as well?"

Her smile is tight. "He's really smart. A genius."

Yeah, a clueless genius. "Why'd you marry him?"

She is quiet for a second. "I don't regret it." She strokes the downy swirl atop her son's head.

I pause as well, trying to process her seeming honesty. "And Husband One?"

She tsks good naturedly at the name. "He's green."

I do not like her answer one bit.

The floor of my studio is littered with elastic bands, foam blocks, ping-pong balls, paper cups. Tired of luring BeiBei away from one dangerous situation after another, I sit him on my shoulder and usher May-ling into my movement studio. Maybe the boy can entertain himself in the mirrors.

"What's this?" May-ling approaches the table in the corner crowded end-to-end with beef empanadas, shrimp croquettas, pork cubanos, and rum cake.

"I was hoping that you'd teach me to merengue. Hence the music that we shut off. And this lunch is supposed to complement the Latin dancing." I rest my head ruefully on BeiBei's thigh. She should know what she's missing.

"You did all this for us?"

For you, you dumb egg, I want to say.

She approaches us and tugs on BeiBei's foot. "Look! Yum, yum."

A male voice calls out from my outer studio.

"BaBa is here!" May-ling exclaims to BeiBei. She scampers to the door.

Husband One comes floating in with a tray of supermarket sushi and kisses May-ling's cheek before handing it to her. He stretches his arms up, and BeiBei kicks off my shoulder leaping for a hug. That this old goat commands such affection from this child, a child who is most likely not his Biological, makes me see red. That he comes to a gym in yet another impeccable wool suit pisses me off further. I feel like a naked midget next to him.

He sees my spread in the corner and grins. "Great minds think alike." He pumps my hand. "I'm so glad you called. It's so much better for us to get to know each other without intermediaries."

So, he's a cheapskate, and a sneaky one at that. "Our matchmaker is a longtime client of mine." He is no such thing, but I want to see Husband One's reaction. I have no intention of stiffing anyone.

"He's great. He's become a good friend." This guy is smooth.

May-ling tells Husband One, "Wei-guo wants us to show him how to dance. He's got music, and the Cuban food is to set the mood. Isn't that nice?"

Husband One's eyes light up with an enthusiasm uncharacteristic of the man I met at lunch. "We haven't danced in such a long time." Asking me to crank the music, he hands BeiBei to May-ling and sheds his blazer.

"BeiBei hates music," I say.

"No such thing." Oozing sex appeal, he glides toward May-ling in his blindingly white shirt. A panther on the prowl.

I could have let it go, but I make him take off his shoes.

"Of course," he says. "That's how your floor stays so shiny."

They sandwich BeiBei and begin to shimmy. They look practiced. Sleek. Like they belong together.

Feeling like a dunce, I crank the stereo like I'm told, pounding it out louder than I can stand. Four fingers in his mouth, BeiBei drools between them, unperturbed. Happy even. They sway, dipping him side to side. Like the matchmaking site says, I might as well not exist.

Husband One spins May-ling out, pauses, and eyes me. "Come on. Join us."

"I'm not much of a dancer," I say. That was the line that I rehearsed last night—the line I was going to utter with great humility and then prove wrong—but sud-

denly the words cannot be more true. "I should go see if, uh," I stall, unable to recall his name, "your other husband is lost outside."

May-ling tells me he's at work and drags me by both hands to the center of the floor. Still holding on, she stares into my eyes as flirtatious as ever and shows me how to take side steps, to lead with my ribcage and then hips. Husband One circles us with BeiBei, modeling the move. She tells me I'm doing the merengue and repositions my right hand on her side just below her breast and straightens my left arm. My face is hot; my hands, shaky; my armpits, gushing. She encourages me to feel the music. To let go.

Just as I get the hang of it, Husband One noses in. May-ling wraps an arm around him, BeiBei on his shoulder between them. She drapes her other on me. Husband One does the same. Together, they smile at me.

"Okay. Let's go left first," he says. "Count of ten."

Their steps sweep me sideways. Husband One keeps count and encourages me to hold on to them. There is nowhere to put my hand except around his waist. Lest I be thought uncooperative, or worse—slow—I back up as much as possible and complete the stifling circle. My face is on fire. My limbs are granite. I hardly know how to move. Where to look.

"Close your eyes," May-ling says.

I cannot be more grateful to shut them out.

"Ribcage then hips," Husband One chants.

I block out his feline grace, loosen my neck, and try to feel the music again. I concentrate on my ribs and my hips, the rhythmic step and drag of my feet. I bump into Husband One as our circle changes direction. He steadies me.

"You move like an athlete," he says.

I suspect that he's making fun of me, but the corners of his eyes crinkle with warmth.

"I'm so glad you want to dance," he continues. "You remind me that the joy dancing evokes, this togetherness, this intimacy, this common direction and built-in safety net, all this is very much what I envision for our family."

His rhapsodizing reminds me of the little tidbit I learned last night to impress May-ling: Merengue originated in cane fields among slaves who danced, dragging one foot, because they were ankle-chained.

I ask if he likes athletes. "Physical types." Like me.

"Very much so. Athletes know discipline and hard work. They've learned to play fair."

A dense workhorse is what he wants.

He pauses and catches my eye this time before leaning and easing me in the opposite direction. I can't deny that I feel invited, that he has extended his hand multiple times. I flash to my fathers practicing *qigong* together at dawn, challenging each other to chess every night. To their decade of steady companionship after MaMa died.

BeiBei wants down, and Husband One lowers him to the floor.

"You want to dance, too?" he trills to the little guy.

He and May-ling hold the boy's hands, and they show him how to step one foot and drag the other. His butt wiggles in imitation. He squeals as we lean into each other ten times to the right, ten times to the left.

Quickly bored by the subtleties of merengue, BeiBei's short legs churn. He leads the circle, pushing up against his mother. Our steps hurry into a shuffle, and soon, we too give up on the dance. We let go of shoulders and waists and hold hands instead to give BeiBei room to roam. May-ling catches my gaze as we gallop faster and faster, round and round. My neck and shoulders loosen. The orchestra drums and pounds inside me. In the mirrors around us, we are a whirl of red, white, and black, of big smiles and open faces. BeiBei's laughter rings and fills my space, and at a lower register, I hear myself join in. ○

THE LONG HAPPY DEATH OF OXFORD BROWN

Jason K. Chapman

Jason K. Chapman lives in New York City where, as the IT director for *Poets & Writers,* he gets to indulge his two main interests, computers and literature. Short fiction publications include sales to *Cosmos, Clarkesworld,* and *Bullspec.* His second appearance in *Asimov's* came about when two Simon & Garfunkel tunes collided with a song by Bread at a really bad intersection in the author's brain. He tells us, "The title, of course, is just because I love Philip K. Dick."

To Oxford Brown, dying was getting to be more annoying every day. He eased himself into the chair across the desk from the young blond woman. The office was cramped and shabby, as if someone had hastily thrown a few pieces of furniture into an unused mop closet. He shifted uncomfortably. The chair hadn't been designed to coddle his seventy-three-year old bones.

"Good morning, Mr. Brown." The woman's smile was smooth and flawless. She must have spent hours practicing it. "I've been assigned as your counselor here at AftrLyf."

"Like an attorney?" Oxford asked. He didn't care much for attorneys.

"No, no," she said. "I'm not an attorney."

A psychiatrist, then. Oxford cared for shrinks even less. "I'm not crazy," he said. "Can I go now?"

"It's the law, Mr. Brown." The woman seemed to turn up the smug factor on her smile. "As of last month, AftrLyf is required to provide you with a clear explanation of your options."

"What's to explain?" Oxford asked. "I die. You put my brain in a blender, plug it into the network, and I get to see me wife again. Right?"

The word "blender" seemed to unsettle her. Good. He was getting tired of her cool, synthetic calm. Oxford prided himself on being able to flap the unflappable.

"Mr. Brown," she said, "I'm here to make you aware of the alternatives."

"Alternatives? What alternatives?"

She folded her hands on the desk in front of her and steepled her fingers. "Are you a religious man, Mr. Brown?"

If he'd been thirty years younger, he'd have shot to his feet. He settled for leaning forward and frowning. "Heaven? *That's* your alternative?"

"AftrLyf is unnatural, Mr. Brown. You should know that it could keep you from reaching the *real* afterlife."

"You don't work for the company, do you?"

"Certainly *not*," she said. "I'm with the Interfaith Council on—"

"And this isn't mandatory."

"I told you, the law requires AftrLyf to—"

"Forget it!" Oxford finally made it to his feet. "My wife is in AftrLyf's system. She has been for three years now, and she'll be there when I arrive. Can you guarantee the same for your—*alternative?*"

"As you say, Mr. Brown, your wife is in AftrLyf's system."

"And God hates competition. I get it." Oxford leaned on the desk, staring down at her. "He sounds like a vindictive bastard."

She began to tremble and her knuckles turned white. For a moment, Oxford thought she was going to hit him, but instead she snatched a clipboard from the edge of the desk and slapped it down between his hands.

"Sign this," she said. "It states that you've refused counseling."

Oh, yes. He'd definitely flapped her.

The night Oxford died, he was sitting quietly in his living room, letting the gloom and the past envelope him. So many evenings he and Emily had spent there, he in his chair, she in hers. They'd read, sipping tea, marking the hours with bookmarks and teaspoons, wrapped in the silence that only two people truly comfortable with each other could share. Theirs had never been a passionate relationship, but it hadn't been unhappy, either. He'd devoted himself to making her happy more than fifty years earlier, ever since that one time in college, when he'd violated her trust completely.

She'd wanted him to do it, though. He'd always been certain of that. Why else would she have left him alone in her dorm room, with her private journal just sitting there in the half-open nightstand drawer?

"Had that dream again last night," he'd read. "Sexy! Hands on me. Lips on mine." Embarrassed, he'd almost stopped reading there, but couldn't. "I hate this! It hurts knowing O thinks of me as just another pal in the Pizza and Beer Club. Hurts when we're together. Hurts when we're apart. I'm such a coward! Why can't I just say something? Maybe I just don't deserve to be loved."

That's when he'd put it back in the drawer, careful to slide the Dickinson collection back on top of it at just the right angle. When she came back, he began watching her more carefully. He studied her the rest of that night as they joined the gang at their favorite off-campus haunt. How could he have missed how sweet her quick, little smile was, or how smoothly she navigated any conversation? By the end of the night, he'd silently vowed to devote his life to making her happy.

Now, sitting alone in the living room they used to share, he congratulated himself on keeping that vow. He took his nightly pills that AftrLyf had given him and relaxed into the short burst of memory they always caused. The doctors had said something about electrochemical stimulation of myelin production, but Oxford just thought of them as a way to make sure your life flashed before your eyes well before your death. He watched the parade of reminiscences as if it were a slideshow: Emily at graduation, Emily in the backyard garden of the house they really couldn't afford at the time, Emily at the beach house he'd given up grad school for, Emily by the fireplace reading a book of poetry and glowing in the flickering light as if it came from inside her.

He never noticed his own death. He missed the tiny beep beep beep of his alert bracelet signaling AftrLyf's collection team. He missed the team's dramatic entry, their clockwork efficiency as they wrapped his head in cooling blankets and inserted the needles into his neck. He never heard the swishing whir of the pump that circulated foul-smelling fluids through his body or the hurried rush of the ambulance as it whisked him to the processing center.

From Oxford's point of view, he fell asleep in his living room and awoke in a bus station.

The blue plastic seat was hard, but the finger poking Oxford's shoulder was harder still.

"Hey. Buddy. Wake up," the man poking Oxford said. "Don't want to sleep your death away, do you?"

Oxford grabbed the man's offending finger, trying to blink away the fog in his head. "Stop that," he said.

"So," the man went on, "you're from Raleigh, huh? How'd the Tar Heels do this year? They get a bowl game? Man, you're old. You should fix that."

"Of course I'm old, you idiot." Oxford had already had quite enough of the man. "And how do you know I'm from Raleigh?"

The man pointed up to an enormous electronic sign on the wall. "Now arriving: Raleigh, NC Ctr #201."

"Oh." Oxford rubbed his eyes. "This isn't at all what I expected. I thought my wife would be here."

"Yeah, well," the stranger said, shrugging, "you can't expect her to just hang out at the terminal waiting for you. She's got a death to live, too, you know."

Oxford looked pointedly at the crowd milling at the edge of the waiting area. "I suppose," he said.

"Them?" The man squinted and blew through his lips like a horse. "Losers, hanging around waiting for news from the living world. Just can't let it go and get on with their deaths, you know?"

"Pot," Oxford said, turning his pointed look toward the stranger, "meet kettle."

The man's eyebrows shot up. "Me? No way. I'm not like them at all. I'm just here to . . ." His voice trailed off into a long sigh and his gaze drifted to the floor. He seemed to deflate, aging as Oxford watched. Wrinkles began to crease the corners of his eyes and his cheeks sagged. His thick, dark hair faded, thinned, became a wispy gray fringe above his ears.

"Man, you look old," Oxford said.

"Eighty-two," he said, glancing up. "I'd be eighty-seven now."

"Neat trick, looking young."

The man planted his elbows on his knees and rested his face in his hands. "I hate being dead."

Oxford left the man to stew in his own self-pity. He had his own death to live, and his first order of business was to find Emily. Outside, he found a bright, sunny day with just the right amount of breeze and a perfect temperature. That made sense, of course. It was all virtual, right? Why program it to be anything but heavenly?

A ten-foot wall, painted pale blue, surrounded the bus station. There were no buses, though, and no streets, just a little bit of well-ordered grass and a few generic-looking trees. A sidewalk led to an archway in the outer wall. "Exit," read a sign above the arch, "to the Yellow Zone."

Uncertain what to do next, Oxford shoved his hands in his pockets. Surprised, he pulled out the rectangular object he found in the right one. It looked a little like a cell phone. "What the hell is this," he said aloud.

A rectangle appeared in the air above the device. Words resolved themselves. It was some kind of projection display. "Welcome to your new AftrLyf Network Guide to Eternal Life."

Oxford groaned. IT people and their stupid acronyms. Did they really think that was cute? What about their customers whose religions didn't have angels? He suddenly realized he had no idea which religions those might be, but he wasn't in the mood to be agreeable. "What about the atheists?" he said.

The display changed. It now read, "Welcome to your new Personal AftrLyf Librarian."

Oxford sighed. "Thanks, pal," he said, shoving the device back into his pocket, "but no thanks." He wrapped his irritation around himself like a comfortable old sweater and strode out through the archway.

The yellow zone was surprisingly urban. Except for the fact that the cars were silent, and the sidewalks were spotless, and the passersby were courteous, and the stores weren't gaudy, and the air smelled like freshly mown grass, it might have been any city. The buildings ranged from one to forty stories, in a mix of styles that somehow managed to blend together smoothly. Whenever he reached an intersection, the lights changed and the cars stopped. Traveling by car must be annoyingly slow. Overall, the place was a little too cheerful for Oxford's tastes.

It didn't take him long to completely lose his bearings, not that he had any idea where he was going. After an hour or so, his feet hurt and his knees ached and his mood took on the sharp, jagged edge of frustration. He stepped into a small coffee shop, despite its unbearably silly name of Cy Klopp's Grill.

The place was like something out of history, with leatherette booths along one wall, a scattering of tiny Formica-topped tables, and a long counter fronted by a row of red-seated stools. Oxford chose one of the empty booths. Lily was there before he'd finished squeaking himself into something like a comfortable position.

"Hi, I'm Lily," she said, tapping her name tag with the end of her pen. "What can I get for you?" She couldn't have been older than twenty-three. Her green-and-white uniform and pale yellow apron looked like something from her great grandmother's era. She was so young. Maybe she'd never had the time to become more than just a waitress.

"I don't—I just needed to get off my feet for a while," Oxford said. Then he realized a bigger problem. He reached for his back pocket. "I don't think I have any money."

Lily giggled. "'Course you do," she said. "Ask your ANGEL."

"My what? Oh, the PAL thing." Oxford pulled it out of his pocket.

"I figured you were a rookie," Lily said, sliding into the booth across from him. "What with the way you look and all." She tapped his PAL with her pen. "It's your wallet, your phone, your computer, your library, everything. Did you sleep through orientation or something?"

Oxford frowned. "I might have dozed off. So what?"

"Everything you need, you can get through your ANGEL."

Oxford held the thing up gingerly, turning it over and examining it from every angle. "So if I lose this, I'm screwed."

Lily gave him a schoolgirl giggle and snatched the device away. Before he could react, she smashed it on the floor. He heard the impact, heard the sound of shattering plastic. Aghast, he peeked over the edge of the table. There was nothing there. He turned wide eyes toward Lily.

She smiled at him and told him to check his pocket.

It was there, all right, just where he'd first found it. He pulled the thing out again, clutching it a little more tightly this time. "You might have warned me," he said.

Lily just giggled.

"You can laugh," Oxford said. "You're young. At my age, you might have given me a heart attack."

"Funny you should say that." Lily tapped her chest with her ever-present pen, this time just below her name tag. "That's what got me. I was just going along one day and all of a sudden—poof!—my heart gives out."

"I'm sorry," Oxford said.

"Eighty years of solid service and the damn thing just quits."

It took him a while to get it out, but Oxford finally managed to whisper the word, "Eighty."

"You're as young as you feel, hon." She winked at him. "Really."

"But how?"

"It's AftrLyf's world," she said, "but it's built to work with our own minds. Look, what did you do, you know, before you died?"

"I had tea."

"I mean for a living."

"Oh," Oxford said. "I was in insurance."

"Oh."

Oxford frowned. Something in the way her voice fell made it seem as if she thought that was a *bad* thing. It's not like he'd been an *attorney* or something. "Why?" he said. "What's wrong with insurance?"

"Nothing! It's just—" She paused a moment, looking uncomfortable. "The computer works with your imagination."

Oxford looked at her a while, trying to decide if waitresses should tie with shrinks on his "annoying people" list, before sliding out of the booth.

"You're leaving?" Lily said.

"I imagine so."

"I didn't mean to be insulting."

"And yet . . ."

"It's just that you're not very good at being dead."

Oxford folded his arms across his chest and glared at her. "I don't mean to be insulting, either," he said, "but why should I take advice from a waitress?"

She laughed, sliding out of the booth. By the time she was standing, her hair was in a tight bun and her uniform had become a white lab coat. She adjusted the dainty, gold-rimmed glasses she was suddenly wearing. "How about from an organic chemist? That's what I used to do. Of course, I was far too shy to give advice to strangers, then, but if it makes you feel better . . ."

An uncomfortable feeling roiled in Oxford's stomach. He didn't like being wrong, and he hated apologizing, but he had to admit he might have misjudged this whole Lily situation. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realize."

"That," Lily said, suddenly becoming Lily-the-waitress again, "is my point."

"Do you mind my asking what you did?"

"I just told you."

"I mean to warrant this," Oxford said. "The waitress thing. It's punishment, right?"

Oxford was back to wandering the streets of the Yellow Zone, still not understanding why Lily had thrown him out of the restaurant. Death had unbalanced her, clearly. He was surprised AftrLyf didn't have some kind of screening process to keep the crazies out. So far, he was unimpressed with the whole experience. If he could just find Emily, everything would be fine.

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, watching the other pedestrians. Several of them had their PALs out, pointing them this way and that and waving their free hands above them.

It was worth a try. Oxford pulled the thing out of his pocket and held it up uncertainly. "Hello, PAL," he said.

An athletic young man in tennis whites stopped. He had his PAL in one hand and a racquet under his other arm. When he looked at Oxford, his smile fell. "Oh, hey," he said. "I'm flattered and all, but—"

Oxford's PAL display lit up with a page from something called the Dead See Scroll. It identified Mr. Tennis Pro as Randy Fleet. The man's whole pre-death biography was listed, as well as his current address, his hobbies, and his favorite books and music. It also noted that he was gay and "actively seeking companionship."

"Oh, wait," Oxford said. "I didn't—I mean, I'm not—"

"If you want to meet people, though," Fleet held his PAL a little higher, "you should turn off the privacy. All it shows is your name."

Oxford looked at the device in his own hand. "You mean everyone's in here?"

"Oh," Fleet said. "You're new. That explains the . . ." He pointed vaguely at Oxford's face.

"Is everyone here rude?" Oxford said.

Fleet shrugged. "About as rude as they were on the outside, I guess," he said. Then he turned and walked away.

Oxford grunted as Fleet's Dead See Scroll page winked out. "Emily Brown," he said.

The display showed nothing but her name, followed by the words, EMILY DOESN'T SHARE HER INFORMATION PUBLICLY.

"Tell her it's her husband!"

EMILY IS CURRENTLY NOT ACCEPTING MESSAGES.

Oxford sighed, shaking his head. The poor woman had never been very good with computers. She probably hadn't figured out how to set her PAL up yet. He remembered the time he'd tried to show her the multi-dimensional real-time actuarial tables he'd devised. She'd tried to put on a brave front, but he could tell her eyes were glazing over. He'd never even gotten to the torroidal risk-aversion factoring graphs.

"I think," Oxford said to his PAL, "that there's an error in your programming."

There was a flash and a zap and Oxford found himself staring at a tall gray box about the size of an old phone booth. A sign on the door read "Oracle." It stood on the sidewalk just about where Randy Fleet had stopped. Oxford glanced around, but no one else seemed to consider it remarkable.

The door swung open and a woman in a conservative blue business suit stepped out. "Hello, Mr. Brown," she said. "I'm Cassandra. How may I help you?"

"Cassandra? Really?" Oxford frowned at her. "Aren't you folks taking the references a little too far?"

Her smile almost seemed genuine. "That really is my name, Mr. Brown, but if it makes you feel better, you can call me Cassie. After all, we're here to give you a happily ever afterlife."

"You're real, then?"

"If you mean alive," she said, "then, no. I'm afraid real-time interaction with the outside world is a few years off yet. But I'm not a computer program, either." She walked over to him and took his arm, steering him toward the doorway. "I'm a real live dead person just like you."

Once through the door, Oxford found himself in an office the size of an aircraft hangar. Its flat lighting and sea of cubicles comforted him more than anything he'd seen so far. The place swam with blue-suited staffers dancing the chaotic hustle of an efficient operation. Suddenly, the afterlife didn't seem like such a bad place.

Cassandra led him into a cubicle that proved to be at least ten times larger inside than out. It was a fully furnished office and, Oxford noted, rather tastefully furnished, at that. He sat in the well-padded chair across from her desk.

"Now," she said, sitting down, "about this error you've detected."

"What error?"

She tapped the keyboard on her desk and stared at the air above it. "Your ANGEL—" she began. "I'm sorry, your PAL indicated you were filing a bug report."

"Really?" Oxford said. "Heaven has bugs in it?"

"I'm a little confused, Mr. Brown. Your PAL indicates you prefer the non-religious taxonomy."

"What? Oh, yes. I do," Oxford said. "Not that it matters, I guess. It just sounded funny."

"I see." The woman's smile grew a little broader. "Quite humorous. Now, about the bug?"

Oxford put his PAL on her desk. "It's this thing," he said. "It won't let me talk to my wife."

"Oh? Let's see." She tapped her keyboard some more. "Emily Brown. Yes. She's been with us just over three years, now."

"That's her."

"Hmm," Cassandra said in the same way Oxford's doctor used to say it before delivering unwelcome news. Then, "Hmm."

"Well?" Oxford leaned forward. "Can you fix it?"

"I'm afraid there's nothing to fix." She sat back and placed her hands in her lap. "Mrs. Brown's PAL account is functioning normally."

"Impossible," Oxford said. "If it were, she'd be waiting to hear from me."

"Mr. Brown, these things happen." Cassandra leaned forward, too, and her voice softened. "It's been three years."

"I'm sure they do," Oxford said, "to other people. Emily, however, is waiting for me and I demand you tell her I'm here this instant."

"She's a customer, too, Mr. Brown."

"This instant!"

Her lips pinched together and she shook her head. "I'm afraid I couldn't do that even if I wanted to. You see, she's somewhere in the Red Zone."

Oxford didn't like the sound of that. "Red" never denoted anything good. "What's the Red Zone?" he asked.

Cassandra was polite enough not to ask how Oxford had managed to miss the orientation sessions. She simply explained the various zones. Blue, of course, was AftrLyf territory, like the terminal and this office, where the company's system had complete control of the environment. Yellow and Green, one urban, the other rural, were worlds designed to be pleasant, carefree, realistic, and safe. Most of the residents never went beyond them.

For the adventurous, there was Orange, where the controls were relaxed. For one thing, residents could feel pain in Orange, which was masked almost completely in the other levels. It added spice for those who didn't like things too easy. It gave skiers more incentive to avoid wiping out. Sky divers a good reason to pack their chutes carefully. You couldn't die there, of course, and you could fix any damage you *did* incur, but some residents just didn't like the good without the risk of the bad.

Then there was the Red Zone.

"Red," Cassandra said, "is a free-for-all. The company has no control there at all. We don't monitor it. We don't alter it. Nothing. The residents have complete autonomy. They control the environment, the world's physics, everything. Once you know how to interact with the system, you can do anything there."

"Then someone kidnapped her?" Oxford said. "How can you let that happen? I demand you retrieve her!"

Cassandra got up and came around her desk. She kneeled next to him and rested her hands on his. "The PALs still work there," she said. "If Mrs. Brown wanted to come back, she could."

Oxford shut his eyes against her look of anguish. It was fake, of course, like everything else in this place. Sympathy 101. Caring in a can. "You don't know that," he said. "You just told me the company doesn't monitor it. She's lost and I have to find her."

"Of course," Cassandra said. "But maybe you should take some time, first. Get used to your new world. Think back. Do you remember being nineteen? How it felt?"

His eyes still closed, Oxford grunted. "I was fat," he said. "I lost sixty pounds that year. Stopped eating and started working out."

"Twenty, then," she said. "It felt good, didn't it?"

"Sure."

"Then take a look."

Oxford opened his eyes to find Cassandra holding a mirror. In it was a man Oxford had known a long, long time ago. A boy, really. A boy who had no idea what to do with his life. He'd had no goals, no focus. No Emily. As he watched, the boy became a man, became a middle-aged man, an old man. He became the Oxford Brown he'd seen in the mirror every day for the last three years. Full circle.

He looked back at Cassandra's face. Maybe her sympathy had been real after all. "Thank you for trying," Oxford said. "I guess there's just too much me in me."

"In AftrLyf," she said, "you're as young as you feel."

Oxford tried to smile. "So it seems."

The mirror vanished from Cassandra's hands and she stood in a single, smooth motion. She walked back around the desk and took her seat again, picking up Oxford's PAL and turning it over and over in her hands, staring at it. It was a while before she spoke again. "If it helps," she said, "there are people here who will be anyone you want them to be for a time."

Oxford tried to decide if she was being serious and, if so, if he should be angry, insulted, disgusted, or something he hadn't even thought of yet.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "Comfort is comfort. I'm just trying to help."

"Seriously?" Oxford pointed to his own face. "I can't even imagine myself young. How am I supposed to pretend some stranger is my Emily?"

"Mr. Brown, you can be anything you wish."

"Right now, I wish I were dead."

"You *are* dead."

"Then I wish there were an off switch!"

Cassandra's breath caught and her eyes grew wide. The air to Oxford's left crackled and, in a puff of smoke, a man appeared. He wore a scintillating gold suit. In his left hand he held a sheet of paper. In his right was a large black box with a red button on top. Red again. Nothing good, then.

"Mr. Brown," the man said, "before we can proceed, I'll need you to read this aloud, state your name clearly, and verify that you wish to terminate your AftrLyf contract."

Oxford looked at Cassandra. "An off switch? Really?"

"Luke," she said to the intruder, "it's a mistake. We don't need you."

"Of course there's an off switch," Luke said. "AftrLyf is not a prison, Mr. Brown."

"Go away, Luke," Cassandra said. "Oxford, tell him to go away."

"Go away, Luke," Oxford said.

The man vanished in an even larger puff of smoke. Oxford tried to wave the air clear. "Is the smoke really necessary?"

Cassandra frowned. "Luke likes his theatrical touches."

"And he'll show up any time I ask for the—the thing?"

"Someone will," she said. "As Luke mentioned, it's not a prison."

"And then they pull the plug and dump my jellied brain down the toilet?"

She smiled. "I suspect the disposal is a little more decorous than that, but that's the gist of it, yes."

"Maybe that's for the best, then," Oxford said.

"Oxford, please. Give it time."

"Why? Emily is—lost, and you say there's no way to find her. So what's the point? It's not like I can sue or get a court order, now is there?"

"I said *I* can't find her." Cassandra stood up again, this time pacing back and forth, three quick steps in either direction. "Look," she said, stopping after a dozen round trips, "I've spent some time in Red."

"You?" Oxford looked at her tidy suit. "You don't seem the free-for-all type."

The air shimmered and, for a moment, her features became cat-like. Her ears grew pointed tips and her clothes transformed into flesh-hugging black fur that covered everything except her six breasts. Oxford blinked and she was the blue-suited Cassandra again. He looked away before their eyes could meet. He kept trying to unsee what he'd seen and silently chastising that part of his mind that didn't want to.

"I've embarrassed you, haven't I?" she said.

"A little."

"Well, that's conservative compared to what you'll see in the zone." She went back to her desk and started typing. "I used to do this Medusa thing, but it was too much work keeping the snakes animated."

"That's easy," Oxford said, glad for something *normal* to think about for once. "You just spin off separate threads with predefined behaviors that loop continuously. That way, you don't use the parent thread's CPU cycles."

Cassandra looked up, clearly surprised. "You're a programmer? I thought you were in insurance."

Oxford shrugged. "Our IT department was annoyingly slow," he said. "I got tired of waiting so I learned to do things myself."

"There's hope for you yet, Mr. Brown." She gave her keyboard one final, triumphant tap. "There. I've set your PAL to use your twenty-year-old avatar. That way you'll look young, even if you don't feel young."

"I see," Oxford said, even though he didn't, really. He looked at his hands. The spots were gone and the skin was smooth and supple. He flexed them. Gone, too, were the irritating creaks and groans. "I suppose I'll get acne again now, too."

"I've also added a safety line," she said. "Just say the word 'sanctuary' and the system will surround you in a three-foot circle of orange zone privileges."

"But you said the system can't track people in the Red Zone."

"It can't." Her expression grew serious. "I'm using the tagging system we use for customer service reps. Attached out here, it can follow you anywhere, but you can't tell anyone. My boss will kill me if he finds out."

Oxford tried to sort language from idiom from taxonomy. "Literally?" he said. "Like the—Luke thing?"

Cassandra shrugged. "I honestly don't know. No one's ever been caught abusing their privileges before."

He stayed quiet. Part of him wanted to back out, thank the woman for her time, and leave, but that left nothing but a long, lonely time while he worked up the courage to call on Luke's services. Still, self-pity was more palatable than the other kind. He was about to speak when a red door appeared next to his chair.

"What's wrong?" Cassandra asked.

Again, he found he couldn't meet her gaze. "I'm trying to believe that you're not doing all of this because you feel sorry for me."

"Of course not," she said. "I'm just a hopeless romantic."

He stood up slowly and, as hard as it was to do, made himself look at her face. He felt shaky and flush with shame. "Tell me," he said, "that it's for Emily."

She smiled at him. It seemed a little sad, but genuine. "For Emily, then."

Oxford nodded. "Wherever I may find her."

On the other side of Cassandra's red door was a seedy-looking road house. Unfinished wood, rough and splintered, planked the walls. The pitted tables and mismatched chairs showed years of wear and even the stains had stains. It smelled of rotting beer and wet animal.

The patrons were a bizarre assortment of creatures, none fully human. There were cat-people, dog-people, horse-people, and people mixed with things that could only come from someone's nightmare. There were impossibly proportioned women and just as impossibly muscled men. There were hairy things with pointy ears and pointy things with hairy ears. Something dressed in pink swirls flapped its butterfly wings at him.

It was just the kind of fantasy clap-trap that Oxford had never understood.

He made his way to the bar, ignoring the stares he drew. The bartender was a seven-foot demon, complete with long, twisted horns, pointed teeth, and bat wings. Still, he was a bartender, and bartenders knew things. Or so the detective stories said.

The demon nodded as Oxford planted an elbow on the bar in what he hoped was a no-nonsense manner.

"You're a little under-dressed for the zone, aren't you?" the demon said. His voice bore both the hiss of steam and the scrape of stone on stone.

Oxford glanced down at himself. "What's wrong with khakis?"

"It's your death," the bartender said. "What'll you have?"

"Information."

"It's a bar, not an oracle booth."

Oxford shook his head. "I'm looking for a woman."

The demon grabbed a towel from behind the bar and started wiping the spots off of a beer glass with it. He glanced over Oxford's shoulder. "Plenty of women here," he said.

"A particular woman."

The demon set the glass under the beer tap. "Some of them are *very* particular."

"You don't understand."

"Sure I do," the demon said. He glanced over Oxford's shoulder again and nodded. "I just don't care."

Something clamped down on Oxford's shoulder, crushing it. Pain shot through him as he felt himself spin around. A minotaur in surfer trunks and a Hawaiian shirt grabbed Oxford's throat. "Run back to the blue, narc," the minotaur growled. "We own the red."

Oxford couldn't breathe. Half-blinded by the tears in his eyes, he kicked at the thing. He connected, but the creature just laughed and tossed him aside. He landed in a splintering pile of bar stools. The monster came at him again. In panic, he grabbed a broken leg from one of the stools and jabbed it into the thing's stomach. It stopped, shuddering. Then the shuddering became chuckling and then all-out laughter.

"You're new at this, aren't you?" the minotaur said.

Oxford pulled his makeshift spear back. There was no wound, no blood. This was the Red Zone, where the residents had complete control. The bull-man had found a way to block the damage. Oxford scrambled to his feet, waiting for the next attack.

When it came, Oxford ducked past the minotaur's sweeping fist and scooted around behind him. With the stick clutched in his right fist, he jumped onto the creature's back and wrapped his left arm around its throat. "Sanctuary!" he yelled, and drove the stick deep into the thing's shoulder.

What started as a beastly howl quickly became a simple human scream as Oxford's adversary fell out of character. "What the hell!" the man cried. "How'd you get past my firewall?"

Holding tight against the bull-man's thrashing, Oxford pulled the stick out. The wound started healing immediately. "Does it matter how?" he said. He shifted the point of the stick near the thing's right eye. "What matters is that I can do it any time I want. And I'm betting I can hurt you just as fast as you can heal."

"I believe you!"

"Then we're done now?" Oxford said.

"Ow, dammit. Yes! We're done!"

"Fine, then." Oxford jumped down. He tried to twirl the stick in his fingers, but it slipped and clattered at his feet. He pushed it away with a flick of his toe. Who was he kidding? He was no warrior. He was just plain old Oxford Brown, a simple, quiet man who was so far out of his comfort zone he might never get back. His hands started to tremble and he hurried over to the bar before his knees could join them. *For Emily*, he thought.

Everyone in the bar, like puppets tied to a single string, reached for their PALs. They all looked from their devices to him, but when he looked back, they each found something else to occupy their attention. The minotaur just vanished.

Oxford looked at the demon behind the bar and smiled. "Her name is Emily Brown."

"Doesn't ring a bell," the demon said, taking a small step back, "but I know a guy who wrote this locater hack. Says he can find anyone in the system."

"Go on," Oxford said.

"His name's Bones. He hangs out here sometimes."

"Call him."

The demon grabbed his PAL, but stopped. "What if he's busy?"

Oxford sighed. "Then do, please, convince him that it's an urgent matter."

Nodding, the bartender hustled off to the far end of the bar to make the call. Oxford couldn't hear what he said, but he was certainly animated enough to convey a sense of urgency. A minute later, Bones appeared at the bar.

Bones was a living skeleton with a pair of bright, blue eyeballs in his head and bushy eyebrows that seemed to float above his eye sockets.

"So," Bones said without introduction. "You're the narc that's got the ALFs so wigged. Kicked Bully Boy's ass, huh? No easy feat, that. He floats some tough mojo code."

Oxford tried not to stare at the twitching eyebrows. "No offense," he said, "but I have no idea what you just said."

"A noob, eh? No time to grok the glossary?"

"Do you speak English?"

Bones sighed. "Narc. AftrLyf employee." He tilted his skull toward Oxford. "That would be you. ALF. AftrLyf Freak. That's those of us who weren't satisfied with being who we were before shuffling off the mortal coil and tweaking it to the great CPU in the sky. Got it?"

"Of course," Oxford said, pausing to clear his throat. "Then I'm not a narc."

"You got a tag on you," Bones said. "You're not seeserv—that's customer service, for those in the slow lane—but you're totally narc. *And* you got high-end mojo, which means you either hack like a machete or you got a guaranteed pipeline to the mothership. I'm betting the latter. What? Is corporate sending in enforcers now? Expired retired security slugs come to clean up the zone? 'Cause I gotta tell you, I never did anything to anybody that they didn't deserve. At least, they would've deserved it, given half a chance."

Oxford only understood some of what Bones had said, but he'd seen a few cop movies. He keyed up Emily's unhelpful Scroll page on his PAL and held it out toward the man. "Let's just say I need to find this woman," he said, smiling, "and that you're

going to help me, and that, in exchange, I'll make sure no narc enforcer slingshots your bony ass into a blue zone hell hole filled with pain, and suffering, and really bad music."

Bones drummed his fingers on the bar. It sounded like someone shaking a box of pencils. "You make a compelling case," he said after a while.

"I'm a trained professional."

"Fine." Bones pointed his own PAL at Oxford's for a second, then began making clattering gestures over it. He did that for two solid minutes, muttering to himself. before stopping and looking at Oxford.

"Well?" Oxford said.

"She's nowhere."

"What?"

"Wait, wait, wait." Bones waved his free hand at Oxford. "That just means she's in a black hole—a dark place hidden from the pidlist—never mind. The point is, there's really only one of those worth going to, and that's the Last Resort."

"Okay," Oxford said. "How do I get there?"

"It's tricky." Bones waved a red door into existence. "You have to be invited, which, for some reason, I never have been, so I can get you *to* it, but you have to get in on your own. Anyway, the place relocates itself randomly in core. You have to scan for the leftovers, then calculate the probabilities of its next jump, and factor in the time it spent at its last location. It can take a long, long—now!"

The door turned black.

"Go," Bones said. "Now!"

Without thinking, Oxford ran through the door.

Oxford stopped himself just inches from the rim of the crater. It was miles across and infinitely deep. Below him lay a black, starry sky. Above, the other sky was wrapped in the twisted rags of hurricane clouds. The eye stood above the center of the crater. A shaft of dazzling sunlight stabbed down though it, falling on what had to be the Last Resort. Floating in midair in the center of the crater was a glittering gem of land. Buildings sprouted from both the top and the bottom—daylight above, nighttime below. As he watched, fireworks shot out from the bottom, falling back up in glittering cascades.

"Okay," Oxford said aloud. "You can do this. You've come this far, haven't you? It's the Red Zone, where the residents control the environment, right? You just fly right on over there just like everyone else."

He took ten steps back. Then ten more. If they could do it, so could he. He took a deep breath and started running. He ran, ran, jumped—and flew!

"For Emily!" he cried.

Arms spread wide, he angled upward, aiming for the day side. *Fly for Emily. Fly for Emily. Fly fo—* Halfway there, he slammed into an invisible wall. He was falling down into the stars! He tried to fly again, but nothing worked. He couldn't think. All he knew was that he was falling. He curled into a ball and cried "Sanctuary!," trying to think of soft, fluffy, resilient things. Pillows. Mattresses. No. A trampoline!

He bounced back up, high into the daylight sky. High enough, he hoped, to clear whatever barrier he'd hit before. Up, up, he went. Over. Then down.

Faster and faster he fell, heading for a pool near the edge of the day side. What now? He couldn't use the trampoline trick again, that would just bounce him back out into space. He needed to slow down, to fly again. Still, nothing happened, and the pool was getting closer every second. Terrified, he squeezed his eyes closed. *Stop, stop, stopstopstopstop.* He risked a look. He was just ten feet above the pool! "Stop!" he screamed.

And he did. He found himself standing on the surface of the water. He looked down. A woman with bright red hair swam at his feet. She appeared to be naked.

"Booo!" she called up at him. "I've seen that one before."

"Excuse me?"

"Try this!" She shot straight up into the air until she was even with him. She was, indeed, naked. Then she grabbed him, and they both plunged down to splash into the pool.

Oxford blinked and shook the water out of his eyes and found her *much* too close to him. He kept his eyes focused on hers.

"I'm Tina," she said.

"Pleased to meet you," Oxford said. "I'm—" He'd meant to shake hands, but his hand accidentally brushed her breast. "—sorry!" He spun around and flailed to the edge of the pool.

"Where are you going?" Tina called.

Oxford scrambled out of the water and hurried away without looking back. Around a corner, he stopped with his back against the rough, stucco wall and tried to calm himself. What was wrong with everyone? He looked down at the clothes plastered to his young, fit form. He was twenty again. Could that Tina person actually have been attracted to him? Did it matter? He'd have been just as embarrassed when he really *was* twenty years old. Face it. Whatever adventurous, bold, daring gene that everyone else seemed to have inherited had skipped Oxford completely. His old life fit him like a pair of well-worn shoes, and he wasn't sure he'd ever have what it took to break in a new pair.

Speaking of which—he squelched his feet back and forth, wishing they were dry, willing them to become dry.

It worked. "All of me should be dry," he said. When that worked, too, he went for the brass ring. Without a word, he insisted that his clothes be clean and pressed. He looked down, admiring the knife-like crease in his trousers. He might be getting the hang of this thing after all. With a little more confidence, he set off to find Emily.

It was simple, really. If she were being held here against her will, then it stood to reason that it had to be by whoever ran the place. He must be some kind of Red Zone crime lord. Even if he weren't guilty, he'd know who was. It wasn't long before someone steered him to Isaac DuFresne.

The terrace on the day side's fourth level had a rich, mosaic tile floor and ivy-traced Doric columns supporting the roof. It cantilevered out from the building, hundreds of feet above the ground level pool where Oxford had landed. Twelve people sat at three round tables at the far end of the terrace. They sat facing the building, watching him approach. DuFresne had to be the big man sitting in the middle.

Oxford marched up to the table before he had a chance to lose his nerve. He slammed his hand down on it, making the plates jump and overturning a tumbler full of something that might have been iced tea. "Mr. DuFresne, I want my wife back!"

The man was shirtless. Bodybuilder muscles rippled across his chest as he waved his hand. The glass was upright again, and full. The spill was gone. "Okay," he said.

"Okay?" Oxford was stunned. After everything he'd been through, it was this simple? "That's it?"

"Well," DuFresne said, smiling, "since I don't know who your wife is, and I don't know who *you* are, what am I supposed to say?"

"You've kidnapped her, you bastard!" Oxford leaned over the table, causing some of the other men to shift in their seats, ready to jump him, no doubt. "You're holding her here and I've come to get her back."

"Are you nuts? I don't even know if you *can* kidnap someone in the AL." He pointed his PAL at Oxford. "Oh. Well, maybe *you* can, but I sure as hell can't."

The others looked at their own PALs and eased back in their seats.

DuFresne shrugged, a motion that seemed to involve about twenty pounds of muscle. "I have no quarrel with the narcs, Mr. B. Nor do I want one," he said. "What's your wife's name?"

"Emily Brown."

He looked around the table. "Anyone know her?"

"Oh, *Emily,*" a man on Oxford's right said. He snapped his fingers as he spoke. "She's, uh, Sasha and Serge's friend's—friend's friend. I met her once. Saw her about an hour ago up at the Sky Pool."

"There," DuFresne said, smiling. "See? Simple and quiet. Two flights up to the top level and follow the signs."

Oxford looked at DuFresne carefully. "No tricks?" he said.

DuFresne raised his hands a few inches. "No quarrel, remember?"

"Then, thanks," Oxford said. He started to leave, but stopped and turned back. He might be in this world for a long, long time. He nodded to DuFresne. "My apologies," he said. "I shouldn't have been so rude."

DuFresne looked surprised. "Don't mention it," he said. "In fact—" he grabbed his PAL and pointed it at Oxford. "—that's an invite tag. It'll pop you right to the front door. Come back any time."

"Thanks again," Oxford said. He turned to leave again.

"And, Sheriff?" DuFresne said.

Oxford turned back. *Sheriff?* Bones had been chatting, it seemed. The word was out that Mr. B. was some kind of super narc enforcer, floating serious mojo.

"Whoever this woman really is," DuFresne said, "and whatever she did, I had nothing to do with it."

Oxford nodded, as if an understanding had been reached between stealthy adversaries. Or, at least, that's how he pictured it in his head. He turned away and forced himself to walk slowly. Once at the stairs, though, and out of sight from the balcony, he ran. Pushing his twenty-year-old legs as fast as they'd go, he raced up the stairs. At the top, he took a right, then a left, and came out into the sunlight on the patio of the Sky Pool.

He thought the place was empty until he saw the top of someone's head poking above a lounge chair. He rushed over and looked down at the chair's occupant. It was a woman—naked, again!—but it wasn't Emily.

Oxford focused on her eyes, trying to decide whether to apologize first or just ask after Emily or stand over behind the chair and—

"Can I help you?" she said.

But her face triggered a memory, an old one. Something happy. Something carefree. Something—college! The old Pizza and Beer Club. "Livie?" he said. "Livie Coleman? How crazy is this? Of all places." AftrLyf was turning out to be a small world.

"No one calls me—Oh, my god. Oxford!" She jumped out of the chair. Oxford backed up a step, afraid she'd want to hug him or something, but she didn't. She grabbed the towel off the lounge chair and held it in front of her, standing with her back to the pool. She shook her head and was suddenly wearing a thick, fluffy robe. "How did you—I mean, I know *how*, but when did—?"

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"I'm looking for Emily," he said. "Have you seen her? Is she here?"

She glanced over his shoulder, then quickly back to his face. "I—" was all she said.

Oxford turned around to find another woman standing just ten feet away. She, too, was naked, but he knew that body, and he knew that face. There was no embarrassment at all, at least not for him. He blinked, and she was suddenly wearing a straight, brown skirt and a white blouse with a little bow at the throat. Her hair was dry and pulled back behind her head.

"Hello, Oxford," Emily said.

He rushed over to her, holding her close. He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. "I've missed you," he said. "I've missed you so much."

"I'm sorry you died," Emily said. "Was it very bad?"

"It was nothing," he said. "After losing you, it was—"

"I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," Oxford said. "I've found you, now. We can be together again. Forever."

"Emily!" Livie cried.

Oxford glanced back at Livie, expecting her to be happy for them, but she wasn't. Those were tortured tears on her face.

"He's my husband, Livie." Emily's tone had the weight of proclamation, the dull surety of litany. There was no sparkle to it. "He loved me and cared for me and did everything he could to make me happy. What else can I do?"

"You can stay!" Livie cried.

Emily's voice was softer now. "You knew this day would come."

"Stay?" Oxford said, trying hard to catch up. Emily seemed happy and sad at the same time. And Livie just seemed— "You and Livie?" he said, at last.

Emily put her hand on his cheek, staring into his eyes. "I do love you, Oxford," she said. "And if you want me to, I'll go with you and we'll be together just like we were and I'll never say a word."

"But . . ."

"But it's always been Livie."

"'O,'" Oxford said, thinking back to the time he'd read her diary, when he'd violated her trust so completely and changed both their lives because of it. She'd had a secret so precious, so important, all this time. And he'd never had a clue. "For Olivia."

"Back in college, I never thought I could," Emily said, "or that Olivia would. And then there you were so sweet and caring and safe and I just—"

"Settled," Oxford said.

"It's not like that."

"It is," he said. He smiled, trying to ease the hurt he saw in her face. "Not in a mean way, but in the way you don't know what's truly possible. You do what you can, because you don't think you can do more."

"I was never unhappy, Oxford."

"I believe you."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," he said, stepping back. Hadn't part of him always known? He'd lived a lie, and he'd led her to live one too. But it had been a comfortable lie that they'd both been willing to settle for. "We had a lifetime together. I don't deserve more. What matters is that you're happy."

"I am," Emily said. Then Livie ran into her arms, still crying.

Oxford turned quietly and left, surprised to find that, deep down, part of him was happy, too.

Oxford sat on the patio by one of the Last Resort's ground floor pools, watching everyone splash and play in the water. He wasn't sure just what to do next. His en-

tire death so far had been focused on just one goal, and whether he chalked it up as a success or a failure, it was done. Now he was facing eternity with absolutely no idea what to do with it.

"Howdy, Sheriff."

Oxford turned to find Cassandra perched on the chair next to him. She was wearing a pair of cutoff shorts and a bikini top. It was a far cry from her seeserv business suit, but at least she was human.

"I thought you were a cat in the zone," Oxford said.

"You didn't notice?" she said. "House rules. Humans only."

"Come to check up on me?"

"I just thought you could use a friend."

Oxford looked at her, trying to decide if she was lying or not. "You narcs take seeserv pretty seriously."

"Listen to you, slinging the lingo like a zonie." She laughed, but quickly settled down into a more serious mood. "Honestly, Oxford, if you want to talk . . ."

He nodded. "You knew all along, didn't you?"

"I still don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I just know that when someone gets lost around here, it's usually because they don't want to be found. Speaking of which, Bones told me where he dropped you. How'd you find the bridge before the place shifted again?"

"There's a bridge?"

She laughed again. It was a nice laugh. "Come on, Oxford, tell me how."

"Really," he said. "I sort of flew. Bounced. Flounced, maybe. It wasn't pretty."

She looked at him for a moment, a curious expression on her face. "Maybe not," she finally said, "but it worked."

"Of course." He spread his arms, taking in everything around him. "The zone is my natural habitat. You just see what you want to see and the world plays along."

"Sometimes," Cassandra said. "Sometimes not."

"Oh, that's right. Heaven's got bugs."

"No." She stood up and her clothes transformed into a long, deep blue evening gown with an open back and a scandalous slit up the left side. She held out her hand to him. "But it has more than a few rats."

He took her hand and stood up. He tried for a tux, but he couldn't get the bow tie right, so he left it with an open collar. "Where are we going?" he asked.

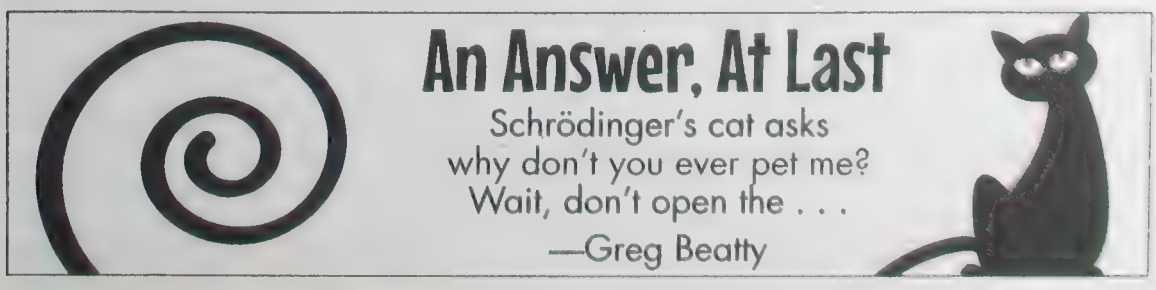
"Down to the night side. There's a balcony spot where the stars are ferocious." She led him to the stairs and down, still holding his hand as if she were afraid he'd run away. "We can talk about you helping with the zone's rat problem."

"Me?" His stomach flipped when the downward stairs suddenly became upward stairs. "Sheriff Brown, riding the red range with his high-end six-shooter mojo PAL?"

"If you like," she said.

She really did have a nice laugh. He pulled his hand from hers and offered her his arm instead. "Don't look so surprised," he said. "You know I'm the old fashioned kind."

She smiled and took his arm. "And the world plays along," she said. ❍



M. Bennardo is the author of over forty published short stories. He is also editor of the Machine of Death series of anthologies. The second volume, *This Is How You Die,* is now available from Grand Central Publishing. His latest tale takes us on a bittersweet visit to the . . .

LAST DAY AT THE ICE MAN CAFÉ

M. Bennardo

Janice turned as Ulno entered the café again from the back door, dragging the now-empty garbage cans behind him after a trip to the dumpster. "Carol doesn't really think that you're the ice man," she said.

"No?" asked Ulno distractedly. Janice and Carol were perched together at adjacent stools on the counter. The clock on the wall drearily pointed to 10 A.M., and seemed to have been stuck in the same spot for hours. The Coca-Cola calendar underneath it was open to August 1974.

Not a customer had been in the place all morning and barely a car had even been seen on the road outside—but that's the way it was now, ever since the new freeway bypass had connected Helena to Missoula, making this stretch of the highway redundant.

"I guess I don't talk about it much."

"What?" shrieked Carol. "You are *not* the ice man!"

Ulno scrubbed his hands in the big steel sink in the kitchen and then slowly shuffled around to lean on the opposite side of the counter from the women, his thick, hairy arms with their faded Army tattoos resting on the pale blue Formica surface. Janice looked back at him—her lips closed in silent amusement. Beside her Carol remained young, incredulous, defiant.

"What did you think all that stuff was?" Ulno finally asked. Then he jerked his head toward the front of the café where dusty cases held the old caribou-skin parka, the half-disintegrated boots, the flint arrowheads, and assorted other artifacts.

Carol looked no less incredulous. "That's just a bunch of replicas—a bunch of tourist-trap doo-dads, because the ice man was found around here." Her eyes looked into Ulno's face, and a moment later, she softened in confusion. "Isn't it?"

Janice's gaze drifted out the café window for a moment, out into the bright Montana morning. The bulk of Mt. Rebo rose up and climbed up away out of the window frame. Somewhere out there, out of view just now, lay its white peak and the three small glaciers resting against the deep rills cut in its side.

Ulno cleared his throat, apparently eager to change the subject. "Last day before

we close up for good," he said. "Why don't we just get out of here and go somewhere fun instead?"

"But where?" asked Carol.

Ulno jabbed his thumb vaguely into the air behind him. "This whole place is mine, you know. Government issued on account of original ancestral claims. We can go anywhere as far as the eye can see."

"I never knew that," said Janice.

Ulno shrugged again. "I guess I don't talk much about that either."

Ulno's jeep rattled down the dirt track that ran behind the café, deep into the back country away from the highway. Great clouds of fine red dust billowed up from under the tires. Carol sat in the passenger seat next to Ulno with her hair tied up in a scarf. Janice was in the back, leaning against the side, trying to keep the dust out of her face. She could barely hear Ulno and Carol talking up front.

"So, you've seen a woolly mammoth?" Carol asked.

Ulno nodded agreeably. "Sure."

"And saber toothed tigers?"

"A couple." Ulno shifted gears as he took a turn. "They weren't that common around here."

"And you were frozen?" asked Carol. She said the last word like it was some kind of shameful event. "For how long?"

Ulno shrugged. "Ten thousand, twelve thousand years? Long enough anyway."

Janice suddenly leaned forward into the conversation. "That's how he lost his fingers," she said dryly.

Ulno laughed and looked down at his right hand as it clung to the steering wheel. The tips of his index and middle fingers were gone, leaving stumps of skin. "Sure," he said. "Froze right off."

"Other things too," added Janice.

Ulno laughed again, louder. "Absolutely," he said. "Destroyed my pride and joy. Like a Hemingway hero."

Carol pursed her lips and sat back with a harrumph. "You guys are putting me on."

"We're not," laughed Janice. "I promise we're not."

Later, they were sitting under the shadow of Mt. Rebo, eating the ham sandwiches and drinking the Coca-Colas that Janice had packed for lunch. A little waterfall tumbled down into a pool of clear water nearby, cliff swallows swooping and diving for bugs over it, chasing their invisible prey in and out of the shade.

"So, wait," said Carol, halfway through her sandwich. "If you're really the ice man, thawed out and all that, then why are you running a diner in the middle of nowhere Montana? Why aren't you doing something important?"

Ulno was lounging against a damp mossy rock, his hands clasped over his stomach. "I didn't do anything important before. And getting frozen in a glacier doesn't exactly qualify you for a position of responsibility." He belched contentedly. "Besides, I like it here."

"No, but I mean, why aren't there scientists and archaeologists looking for you all the time? Don't they want to ask you questions?"

"They did. Sometimes they still do. But by the time I got back from Vietnam, they mostly seemed to have lost track of me."

Carol's eyes practically bugged. "They let you go to Vietnam? In the Army?"

"Sure," said Ulno, his voice a regretful whisper. "I wanted to. How could they stop me?"

For a moment, there was no sound but the trickle of water and the heavy drone of

insects. And then Janice stood and started rolling up the sleeves of her blouse and folding down the collar. "Why don't you two go for a swim?" she asked as she moved to a rock in the sun. "I want to catch some sun."

It took a few minutes for Ulno to convince Carol to strip down for skinny-dipping, but it wasn't long before Janice could hear them both splashing and laughing in the pool. A little while later, the splashing stopped and the murmuring began. Janice knew what was going on—the same thing had happened back when she first met Ulno six years ago in Helena, after he was home from Vietnam.

Slowly, somehow, acceptance must be sinking into Carol's brain by now. Sun-baked drowsiness would help with that. But yes, it would start to seem real. Maybe he really was the ice man. Maybe he really had spent all those years trapped in the ice of that glacier—high up above them in the cool air on the summit of Mt. Rebo.

She'd ask, What were you doing up there?

He'd murmur, Just climbing—just seeing how high I could go.

What happened?

I fell into a crevasse in the glacier. They were a lot larger back then—the glaciers, I mean. I wasn't hurt, but I couldn't get out. So eventually I froze.

Were you aware that whole time?

Not really, he'd say. It was like being asleep a long, long time. Dreams upon dreams upon dreams, whole lifetimes of dreams.

Then she'd ask, Did you feel cold when it happened?

No, he'd murmur. When you freeze, you don't feel cold. It's strange to say, but you feel warm.

But your fingers . . . And everything else . . .

Yes, he'd say.

Oh, poor Ulno. You poor Hemingway hero!

And moments later, of course, she'd find out that he wasn't such a Hemingway hero after all, when he responded the usual way to her kisses. There'd be a playful slap, and Carol would roll away, suddenly shy but not as offended as she would pretend.

Even after all those years in the ice, Ulno still had sensation, nerves, reflexes. That was just a line that he had used on the girls back in Helena to win their pity and get their guard down. Somehow, Janice hadn't minded the deception when he'd used it on her.

She hadn't even minded later when she found out about his fingers—how he had really lost those. Self-inflicted wounds in Vietnam, a dishonorable discharge, but a ticket home at least, back to the tract of nothing the government had given him by a poorly traveled highway. But he'd been too transient, too unsettled, too unambitious—so they had lost touch. At least until he opened the café. Then Janice had come back to him for a while.

But then—it was hard to say. Who knows what happens? Things change, people grow older. Pretty soon they stopped spending nights together. It happened without a fight or a discussion or even a conscious decision. Just slowly, over time, they fell into different ruts, a little farther apart from each other.

Janice hadn't known it before, but she was glad the café was gone. Maybe now, Ulno would find something else—something better. Something that would last longer and mean more.

"All right, sleepy head," called Carol from the other side of the pool. Janice was suddenly aware that it was cooler now and windier. The sun had slipped behind Mt. Rebo. "If you want a ride back to the café, it's time to get up."

Nobody spoke much on the ride back. The next day, there'd be no café to go to—no rut to fall into, no reason to see each other. Janice hadn't even thought about what

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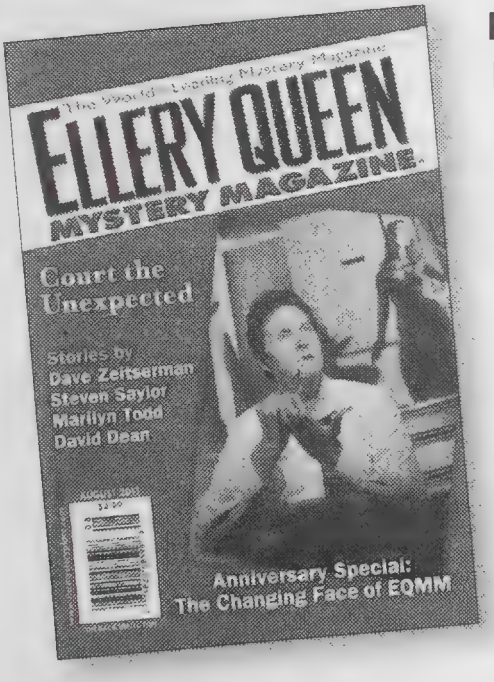

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she would do next. She had a little money saved, but not much. But she would find something to pass the time, until . . .

Until she got another postcard from Ulno, like the one he had sent her in Helena after he'd opened the café. Short, unsentimental, promising nothing, but still able to make her heart jump. "Hi Janice—Long time, no see. Got a good gig going. Come visit sometime.—Ulno."

That was it—the postcard that had directed the next four years of her life, both good and bad. And now it was all ending. But she could wait for the next one. Things would be different then. Things would work out. All Ulno needed was another new beginning.

The jeep pulled into the café parking lot just as the sky started to turn indigo above them. Lonely stars poked out of that vast expanse, and Venus burned bright and yellow over the mountains on the horizon. Carol lingered over her goodbyes, but Ulno had gone quiet and cold. Finally, there was nothing left for her to do but leave.

"Why don't you go, too?" asked Ulno.

"I want to help you clean up."

"Don't bother," said Ulno, but Janice followed him inside anyway. They tidied up here and there, but the café was mostly clean enough already. The tables were wiped; the dishes were washed. Ulno had thrown out most of the leftover food earlier that day.

At last, for want of anything else to do, Janice wrote a phone number on the back of a paper placemat and passed it to Ulno.

"What's this?"

"You forgot to ask Carol for that tonight."

Ulno shook his head. "I don't want this. She's nice, she's pretty . . . but it won't work. It'll be a few dates, and then nothing. I don't think I can take any more endings right now."

Janice shrugged. "You should call her anyway."

Ulno balled up the placemat and threw it in the empty garbage can. "Thanks for everything, Janice. But just let me finish up here alone." With that, he disappeared into the back, and Janice sat down on the same stool she always did when she had nothing else to do.

When the clock on the wall clicked over to 10 P.M., Janice was aware that Ulno had been gone for a long time. Even spaced out like she had been, she would have heard him leave. And for the past half hour, she hadn't heard anything.

The back of the café was dark and silent, lights mostly turned out and everything put away. When Janice got to the walk-in freezer door, she paused. A frown creased her lips and her eyebrow arched. Opening the door, she was greeted by a puff of frigid air and the sight of Ulno standing still, arms crossed over his chest, little bits of frost already beginning to form in his hair.

Ulno's breathing had slowed, but Janice could see the gentle rise and fall of his chest if she watched close enough. She could still wake him up and—what? Give him a pep talk, send him on his way, and wait to hear from him again in a few years when he had his next gig figured out?

Janice suddenly felt ashamed of what she had tried to do with Carol. She had pretended to herself that she was doing Ulno a favor, trying to make him feel better by setting him up with somebody young and pretty and new. But she knew that she had only done it because he was down. She had been trying to bum him off on somebody else while things were bad, so she could pick him up again when things got good. Some friend she was. No wonder they always drifted apart.

Still, going to sleep in the freezer wasn't exactly a long-term solution either. It would be one thing if Ulno could just wake up again after another ten thousand

years—wipe everything clean and start new for a third time. But once he stopped paying the electric bill, they'd shut his power off in two or three months. At best, this plan would get him through to November.

Janice reached out to wake Ulno, but then stopped short. She thought instead about where she'd be in November. Probably living in half of a cheap apartment, working some crummy job, eating canned soup and dried pasta off a hot plate. It wasn't much. It wasn't anything at all, really. If she had more time, maybe she could do something better. Or maybe she just wasn't that kind of person. But she didn't think it was fair to expect Ulno to always come up with the plans and make them happen. And neither was it fair to her to always have to shoehorn herself into a life already in progress.

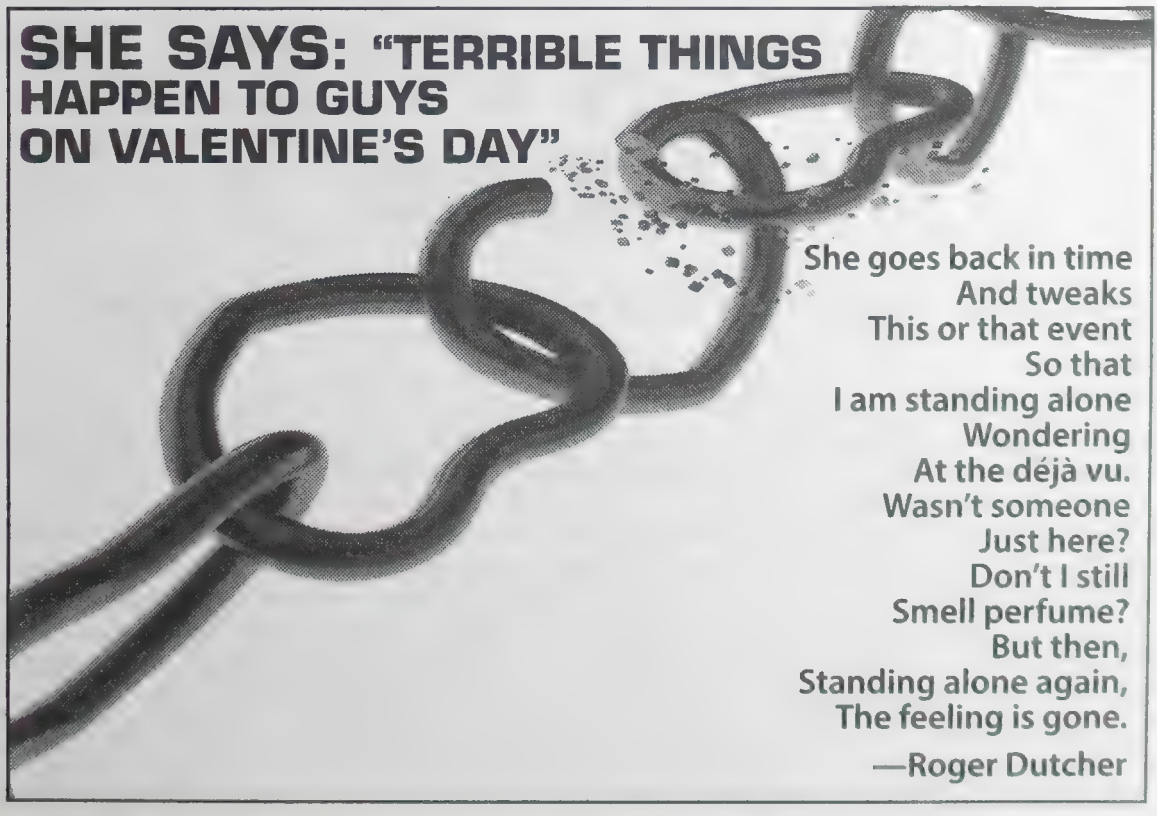
Shutting the door to the freezer again, Janice went back to the front of the café. She didn't have a postcard, so she used the back of another placemat. "Hi Ulno," she wrote. "Three months isn't long enough to get anything going. But if you want, we can figure it out together. Love, Janice."

Then she taped the placemat to the freezer door, shut out the last few lights in the café, and went back out to the parking lot. Overhead, the Milky Way was starting to show high up above; a ribbon of faint luminescence that went around and around and around the Earth without stopping.

Maybe he'd come, and maybe he wouldn't. But all Janice could do was put the invitation out there. He'd often told her, half joking and half serious, that he'd been a pretty good caveman once upon a time. But Janice knew he couldn't have done that by himself. Hunters always needed gatherers. That was part of what made humans the way they were.

But for now, Ulno could have three months of dreams. And in that time, Janice would start what she could for herself, no matter how little that might be.

Just one minute later, she was already headed down the road. ○



Sarah Pinsker is a singer-songwriter with three albums and a fourth in production. Her fiction publications include stories in *Strange Horizons* and *Daily Science Fiction*. Sarah lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Her website is *http://www.sarahpinsker.com* and you can follow her at *http://www.twitter.com/sarahpinsker*. The author's first tale for *Asimov's* focuses a camera lens on love, loss, and . . .

THE TRANS-DIMENSIONAL HORSEMASTER RABBIS OF MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

Sarah Pinsker

I. Options for an Imagined Pictorial Eulogy of Oliver Haifetz-Perec

IMAGE 1: The photograph depicts an unmade bed covered in gear and clothing. A military-style duffel, half filled, dominates the shot. A camera bag sits next to it, cameras and lenses and lens cleaners laid out neatly alongside.

IMAGE 2: Shot from the center of the bed. A shirtless man reaches for something high in the closet. He has the too-thin build of an endurance runner, his bare back lanky and muscled. There is a permanent notch in his left shoulder, from where his camera bag rests. A furrow across his back tells of a bullet graze in Afghanistan. The contrast of his skin and his faded jeans plays well in black and white. A mirror on the dresser catches Yona Haifetz-Perec in the act of snapping the picture, her face obscured but her inclusion clearly deliberate. Multiple subjects, multiple stories.

IMAGE 3: This photograph does not actually exist. A third person in the room

might have taken an intimate portrait of the two alone in their Tel Aviv apartment, photographers once again becoming subjects. A third person might have depicted the way her freckled arms wrapped around his torso, tender but not possessive. It might have shown the serious looks on both of their faces, the way each tried to mask anxiety, showing concern to the room, but not each other. They have the same career. They accept the inherent risks. They don't look into each other's faces, but merely press closer. It would have been the last photograph of the two together. Eleven days later, he is beaten to death in Uganda. His press credentials, his passport, his cameras, his memory cards, and cash are all found with his body; it isn't a robbery. Since the third option doesn't exist, the last picture of Yona and Oliver is the one that she took from the bed: his strong back, her camera's eye.

IMAGE 4: A Ugandan journalist sent Yona a clipping about Oliver's death. A photo accompanies the article. It shows a body, Oliver's body, lying in the street. Yona doesn't know why anyone would think she would want to see that photograph. She does; she doesn't. She could include it, make people face his death head on.

Instead she opts for

IMAGE 5: in which Oliver plays football with some children in Kampala, his dreadlocks flying, his smile unguarded (photographer unknown), and IMAGE 6.

IMAGE 6: The only photo in this collection which was actually taken by Oliver Haifetz-Perec, photojournalist. It is a portrait of Lutalo, the Ugandan gay activist he was there to meet. The camera's gaze is unflinching, as is Lutalo's. His pseudonym means "warrior." The scar across his cheek and nose is the first thing that catches the viewer's attention, traveling from upper left to lower right of his face, the natural path of any English reader's eye. The lighting of the shot highlights the scar rather than diminishing it. Oliver was killed when he intervened in an attack on Lutalo, who managed to escape into hiding. This is a small comfort to Yona, the idea that Oliver's murder was not meaningless. She holds it to her chest when she tries to sleep at night. She wonders why Oliver stepped in, when he had always sworn by his journalistic objectivity, and if she would have done the same. She has always thought of herself as a witness, though she knows that her presence is in itself an imposition on the scene. The photograph of Lutalo is the last one on Oliver's memory card.

II. No Photos

All that Yona saw of Johannesburg, she saw from the descending airplane. She didn't bother to take photographs, hadn't taken any in months, though she knew she'd have to get over that soon enough. In any case, the plastic window would ruin any shot she composed.

Between questions about whether she was sure she was ready to return to work, her editor had warned her to expect secrecy, to accept a blindfold and an undisclosed location. She had assured Mel that she would be fine. In truth, she knew she would welcome the chance to get out of the apartment and away from the constant reminders of Oliver. A recently rediscovered village sounded interesting enough.

Her contact met her at baggage claim. He was tall, six feet at least. His polo shirt and khakis made him look like the drivers from the game parks. They all had com-

puter-printed signs, though, whereas he had handwritten her name on a piece of cardboard and drawn a camera next to it.

"Welcome," he said. "My name is Odwa Mabuya. Chief Project Manager. I know you must be nervous to go with a stranger. I hope you understand our precautions." His English was accented but fluent. She wondered why he had come to pick her up himself, instead of sending someone.

She shook his hand. "In my line of work I've gotten in a lot of cars with strangers, but you're definitely the first to blindfold me."

"We hope you understand the need once you see what we are protecting."

"Some sort of lost tribe?" she asked.

He smiled. "Ja. Exactly."

He took her duffel—Oliver's duffel—but let her carry her own camera bag to the parking lot. They arrived at a small white pickup truck. He put her bag on the seat and proceeded to go through it without apology. She offered her camera bag, and he did the same cursory examination. He searched her pockets as well, in a manner that was both awkward and professional. No hands strayed where they shouldn't have, but he seemed uncomfortable with the process. Her phone, her earplugs, her passport, her sleeping pills, her anti-malarial pills: all went into a pouch that he wore around his neck. Everything else he stowed in the small space behind the seat of his truck. He motioned for her to climb in.

"Sorry," he said. He handed her an airline-issue sleep mask patterned with snoring sheep. Yona wondered what anyone else in the parking lot thought of this, if they were watching. She put the mask on. These were the terms to which she had agreed.

"Would you like one of your pills to sleep?" he asked. "The journey is long, and you may feel ill from the bouncing of the *bakkie*—the truck—without your eyes to warn you. My bakkie has terrible shock absorbers."

She wanted to say no, wanted at least some sense of where they were going, but as she opened her mouth to do so, the energy to argue drained from her. She was tired, and she would only be frustrated by her inability to see her surroundings. All the pictures untaken.

"Yes, please. Just a half." She held out her hand.

She dreamed of the night before Oliver had left for Uganda. Clothing and cameras and documents were strewn across every surface as he tried to choose what would come with him this time. At some point he had given up on packing and pressed her to him.

"It's only three weeks," she said. "We've been apart three weeks before, dozens of times."

"Not since the wedding. It feels different somehow."

"It's no different, Ollie. I'll do my assignment, you do yours, and we'll be back here in no time, with three months all to ourselves."

He kissed the top of her head and drew back to look into her eyes. "You promise?"

She opened her mouth to agree, but in the moment she blinked, his face was not his face anymore. Or rather, it was his face, but bloodied and bruised, his eyes gone, the sockets smashed.

"I promise," she said, hoping he believed her.

"Are you okay?"

It took a moment for her to orient herself. The air whipped by the open windows of the vehicle and the evening sun warmed her face. Her head felt stuffed with cotton.

"Just a bad dream," she said, still drifting.

She woke again as the vehicle slowed. She heard the hum of a powerful electric fence. The hairs on her arms stood up.

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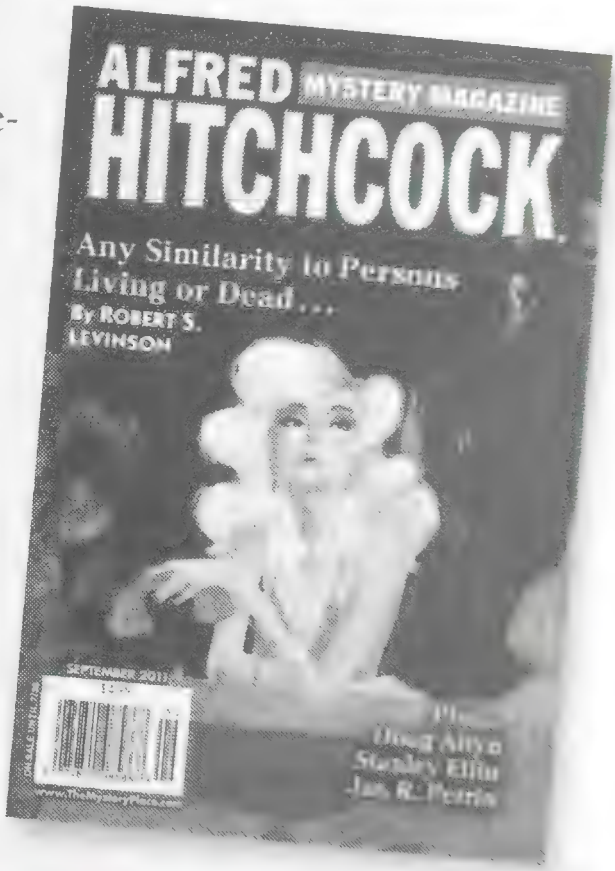

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"Are you awake?" Odwa asked once they had passed the fence. "You can remove the blindfold now. We are here."

After the drug and the darkness, Yona could barely keep her eyes open. Still, she wanted to see everything; she had already missed so much. She glanced at the tall fence receding in the truck's mirrors. In front, the pavement had given way to two well-worn furrows through the grass. Where was here? She wasn't supposed to know, yet she couldn't help but wonder. She had landed at midday and it was almost dusk now. She judged by the placement of the sun that they were driving north and east.

"Do I get to know anything about where we are?"

"Mpumalanga."

That narrowed it down to a province, at least. She felt a familiar pull, for the first time in months. "May I start taking photographs?"

"Ja."

She twisted to reach her camera bag and pulled out the Nikon D4.

III: Web Extra: Select Photographs from Yona Haifetz-Perec's Trip Journal

SHOT 1: The guide in profile. His Bafana Bafana cap obscures his eyes. His right hand is on the wheel, his left on the gearshift. The setting sun is directly behind the photographer, putting Odwa's face into sharp relief. He smiles for the camera, an easy smile.

SHOT 2: The hills they traverse are verdant, rushing headlong into their southern hemisphere summer. They roll with fractal curves. The composition of the photo mimics the topography of a hand: vein and muscle and sinew and bone.

SHOT 3: Three identical vehicles, white pickup trucks wearing similar coats of dust. The building behind them is long and low, its roof thatched and its walls mud. It looks newly built. A satellite dish nests in the thatching, an incongruous note.

"When do I get to meet them?" Yona asked.

Odwa lifted his cap and scratched his head. "Tomorrow. You should rest first."

She debated arguing, but exhaustion was creeping over her again. They were still in the same time zone she had left uncountable hours before, but the recycled air in the plane and the sleeping pill had taken their toll. She was relieved to discover that her hut had running water and a cleanish bathtub. She had bathed under much worse conditions. The deep tub was luxury as far as she was concerned, even if the water was only lukewarm.

SHOT 4: The photographer's blurred legs resting on the rim of the tub, the bed in sharp focus beyond them. *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman.*

She only soaked for a few minutes, afraid she was tired enough to drown in the tub. She fell asleep with the lights on, a camera beside her, always watchful.

In the morning, she wandered out of the hut with her little Panasonic in hand. The staff of the facility, the anthropologists and whichever scientists were on this project, greeted each other as they stepped out of their own huts, all ignoring her.

SHOT 5: A tiny dead chameleon on the porch, desiccated but still holding onto a twig with its tail.

SHOT 6: Breakfast in the staff hut, on a small table in the kitchen nook. Rooibos tea in a china cup, buttermilk rusks on a saucer. Grenadilla juice, syrupy and sweet even in a photograph.

Odwa joined her after she had assembled and photographed her breakfast, handing her one of her own Malarone pills and a glass of water by way of greeting. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." She swallowed the pill and drank the water. "Best I've slept in weeks, actually."

She stirred some milk into her tea, then warmed her hands on the chipped teacup. "Will we go this morning?"

"You can meet me at the bakkie in one hour." He grabbed a rusk from the tin where she had found hers and disappeared out the door again.

She had nothing to do for the intervening hour other than nurse her tea and biscuits. She repacked, stuffed a few granola bars into her pockets, filled her water bottle and clipped it to her camera bag. There was a wooden bench outside the main building and she situated herself there to wait. She waved at the people who walked around, but none gave her more than a curt nod.

SHOTS 7–35: Photos of the staff going about their business. They laugh and joke with each other, fill the trucks with petrol from cans.

Yona was surprised Odwa didn't blindfold her again, but she thought it better not to ask the question. She guessed that once inside the compound, it didn't matter anymore. She wouldn't be able to find her way back here again if she tried. Even now, clutching the door as the truck careened down the rutted path, knowing the time and the position of the sun, she could no more say where she was in relation to the previous hill than to the huts they had stayed in the night before.

SHOT 36: The path is clogged with goats. The goats are in no hurry.

"Why did everyone back there ignore me?" she asked Odwa. "Your colleagues?"

"Not everyone thinks you should be here."

"Me personally? Or a photojournalist in general?"

"A photographer. They say we take our own photos for our own work. Why do we need someone from outside?"

She played with the focus on her lens. "And why am I necessary?"

He grinned at her. "You know the phrase 'seeing is believing,' ja? Here, that is not true. Believing is believing, a separate thing entirely. Your eyes will lie to you."

"I don't understand."

"Does your camera ever lie?"

"I try not to let it."

"But you can foreshorten a distance, so a man looks as if he is standing on the edge of a cliff when he is in fact in no danger?" He took his hands off the wheel to demonstrate foreshortening. The truck lurched to the right and he grabbed the wheel again. Yona searched for the seatbelt, drawing it across her lap. "Well, yes."

"And you can choose a frame such that a small group of people can look like a crowd? Imply that there are more behind them?"

"Yes."

"Your eyes will lie to you here, in that same way. I will tell you the truth, and hopefully you will choose to believe it, but it will not be the same thing that your eyes tell you. Belief is the opposite of seeing; it is trusting something you cannot see at all."

She tried to make sense of what Odwa was saying. "But if that's the case, I really don't understand at all why you need me here."

"We bring you here, and you tell the rest of the world what you saw. What your pictures show. And they leave us alone here to do our work, and they send us money to continue our work, and they say their prayers of thanks that such mysteries exist."

"That's a gamble, if you're suggesting there's something I shouldn't be photographing. I won't compromise myself."

"It will not be a compromise. You'll see."

His self-assurance was starting to bother Yona. He didn't know her. "And you?" she asked. "If so many of your colleagues are opposed to my visit, why am I here?"

"I am the project manager. I win. Unless I'm wrong about this, as they think. Then I will be angry with myself, and my project will not get a chance to get over it."

Yona wasn't sure how to respond to that statement. She lifted her camera to her eye to disguise her silence.

SHOTS 37–51: Yona's fastest shutter captures the caprice of springbok on the adjacent hills.

Odwa snorted. "Why would you waste film on springbok? If you want nature photos, I can find you animals worth photographing."

She shook her head. "It's digital. No film wasted. I can delete them later if I don't like them. But I do. I like them because they're here, and they're part of the story of my journey, even if you're indifferent to them."

He shrugged, but a moment later pointed to a waterfall in the distance. "For your nature album."

SHOT 52: A waterfall cuts through a steep rockface. Typical of those found in other areas of the Transvaal escarpment.

It took them twenty minutes more to reach their destination. Yona would not have imagined that such a large area might be fenced and closed off. They had not been traveling at highway speeds by any means, but the size still violated her sense of scale.

And then they were there.

IV. The Horsemaster Rabbis of Mpumalanga Province: A Multimedia Exhibition

SHOTS 1–8: This exhibit opens with the photographer's descent into the tribe's land. A soft-bellied curve, then a steep switchbacked trail ending in a grassy valley. Small horses graze behind a rough stone wall. Their necks are thin, their bodies wiry, their joints large. Their coats glow with good health. A narrow stream bisects their grassy pasture. They raise their heads as a unit: wary, curious.

Odwa cut the truck's motor, and they sat for a moment in silence. Yona switched to her old Leica for a few shots, just for the chance to hear a shutter click. The sound of the shutter would keep the horses interested. She took pictures until she sensed Odwa's impatience, then returned her camera to her lap. He was right; they were not her subjects.

Her host started the truck again, and they traveled the length of the valley, be-

tween steep rock walls. On the other side of the path from the pasture there were crops growing in neat rows: maize, sugarcane, groundnut. The fields gave way to a small orchard, and beyond that, the village itself. Yona counted eighteen small sandstone dwellings.

SHOTS 9–13 take in the little buildings, their orientation to each other and the central commons. They have no windows. The entrances to the huts are wide and doorless, with carvings in the doorframes. There doesn't appear to be anything stirring except for the goats. There are goats all over the clearing; a ghost town of goats.

Odwa got out of the truck, so Yona did the same. A gray goat wandered over to lip the buckle of her bag. She shooed it away.

"Where are they?" She didn't lower her camera.

"Just watch. They left when they heard my bakkie."

She watched the doorways, still expecting to see a face peek out of one of them. She held her camera ready. "What do you mean 'left'?"

"Watch," he repeated.

They stood in silence. The air carried the mingled scents of stew and goat and horse, a combination that Yona found surprisingly pleasant.

SHOT 14: Ears of maize piled on a rock, half of them shucked.

SHOTS 15–17: A small yellow bird alights on the stone and flies away with a tangle of cornsilk.

Somewhere, close yet far away, Yona heard voices. A moment later, there were people everywhere. Yona nearly dropped her camera.

"What the hell just happened?" she asked.

Odwa grinned.

"Take your pictures, photojournalist. Plenty of time for answers."

He was right. If she had been paying attention, maybe she would have had a picture to prove what her eyes suggested she had seen. What had been an empty clearing a moment before was suddenly filled with people. They hadn't walked onto the scene. They appeared in mid-action, mid-conversation: talking, laughing, sharpening knives, beating blankets. These were not the South African tribespeople she had expected, either: they looked more Middle Eastern than Ndebele. Their clothing was loose and light-colored, suited for the desert.

She took pictures as if the people had been there all along. As if they were an ordinary farming collective, which they seemed to be.

SHOTS 18–38, and CONTACT SHEET 1: The people of the lost village go about their chores: pounding meal, calling goats, stoking the fire beneath the stewpot. A child shimmies up the narrow trunk of a tree to pick fruit. She looks directly at the lens, conspiratorial, before dropping a guava on the head of a boy below.

"Really," Yona said when she paused to switch memory cards. "Where did they come from? How did you find them?"

"A team of archaeologists discovered an abandoned village, and was starting to examine artifacts they found there, when all of a sudden it was full of people. Poof! Not abandoned after all. Your first question is harder, and I do not want to color your experience. Do you want to meet them?"

"Yes, please. I assume they don't speak English. One of the tribal languages?"

He shook his head. "None of the local dialects. Theirs is derived from Syriac, as best as we can tell, but parted from it long ago. We have an expert here working on that puzzle alone. Most of us can speak a few words, but we need to learn so much more."

Behind Odwa, a horse stuck its head out of one of the huts and whinnied. A nearby child mimicked its call even before the horses in the field could respond.

"They let the horses in their homes?"

SHOT 39: A small bay horse stands in the doorway of a sandstone hut.

SHOT 40: A young woman appears beside the horse, an arm draped over its neck. They lean into each other.

"They do, but not all of the horses get that privilege. It seems to be the favorites, the way Arabian sheiks brought their favored mounts into their tents. You will see they have a lot of commonalities with desert peoples, even though they have been settled here and farming for so long. We still have so much to study. Come."

Odwa strode across the grass toward the village, with Yona a few steps behind him. She was watching the goatherds when she saw them all flicker and disappear, then reappear. Yona snapped several pictures in quick succession, then stopped to page backward through the photos. Even at her highest speed Yona couldn't explain the occurrence. She considered shooting video with the Panasonic automatic.

Odwa had outdistanced her by several meters. He sat down next to the person shucking maize, a sturdy middle-aged woman with a long braid, black flecked with grey. He gestured to the ground on the opposite side of the woman's stool. Yona copied his position, lowering her camera bag to the grass and placing the Nikon on top of it before settling herself.

"This is Nura," he said, gesturing to the woman beside him.

"Nice to meet you," Yona said at Odwa's prompt. "My name is Yona."

Nura put a hand on Odwa's arm and asked him a question. She spoke slowly and enunciated each syllable. He turned to Yona, an embarrassed look on his face.

"She says you look sad, and wants to know if someone died. May I tell her?"

Yona nodded. Odwa hadn't asked about Oliver at all, but she realized that he had spoken to her editor and researched her before her arrival. Of course he knew. He turned back to Nura and said three words, pronouncing each haltingly. Nura spoke again, and he spread his hands and took off his cap to scratch his head. She tried again using other words.

Odwa settled his cap back on his head before speaking. "I think she is trying to say that she is a widow, too."

The word "widow" hit Yona like a physical blow. She had avoided using it, had avoided looking at it full-on, even when it had presented itself on paperwork in the weeks after Oliver's death. She had only just gotten used to the word "wife" when that one had been taken away.

Nura grabbed Yona's hands. The woman's hands were dry and warm around Yona's own. Then they were gone as Nura flickered away and back; in her peripheral vision she saw the others all disappear. Yona was unnerved by the sensation of being held, then free, then held again. This feeling cemented the knowledge that what she was seeing, whatever it was, was not illusion. Nura reached down and wrapped her arms around Yona. Yona sat awkwardly in the embrace, not sure whether to allow it or break away and risk offending their host. She stayed until Nura released her.

Some of the others came over to where they sat. Nura spoke to them. One by one,

the villagers introduced themselves and embraced Yona as if they had known her all their lives. Yona, who had once been hugged by Amma, the Hugging Saint, felt as if each of these hugs was a thousand times more healing than that one had been. She wanted to weep; it didn't seem fair that she got assigned to a village of hugging saints, while Oliver had been beaten to death on the streets of Kampala. But then, those were choices each of them had made. She had been to war zones too. She held the tears back and accepted thirteen embraces.

When they were done, the others returned to what they had been doing. A young man, Razal, gestured for her to follow him. Odwa nodded, and she went over to where Razal was repairing an ornate leather saddle. She was surprised at the decorative carvings, when so much of what she had seen so far was subsistence-level. Razal's invitation seemed to have opened the others up to sharing as well, and Yona found herself with plenty to photograph.

SHOTS 41–57 and CONTACT SHEET 2: Afternoon in the lost village. The children chase the goats, the goats chase the children. Tack is cleaned and repaired. Supper is made, horses are fed.

"There are two more important things for you to see," said Odwa.

"I'm ready," Yona replied, though she couldn't imagine what might top the things she had seen already.

Odwa led her to one of the huts. Yona peered in, and a small horse peered back from the darkness. One of the children who had been playing with the goats ran up and flung his arms around the horse's neck, swinging himself up onto its back in one movement. Odwa raised his eyebrows at the boy. The boy grinned.

Yona didn't see him prod the horse in any way, but it leapt through the doorway like a battle charger. She saw the child shift his weight backward; his horse stopped in its tracks. Odwa clapped his hands and said three words. The little boy laughed and called to one of his friends. Others, children and adults, moved toward their huts.

Odwa grinned at her. "We don't know much of their language yet, but I've heard them say 'what can your horse do?' enough times to be able to get that one across."

SHOTS 58–70, CONTACT SHEET 3, VIDEO #1: The tribespeople demonstrate why the anthropologists have nicknamed them "Horsemasters." An impromptu display demonstrates not only their riding skill, but the intense bond they have formed with their mounts. The children ride without bridle or saddle, while the adults deck their horses out in tasseled finery. The colorful tack is decorated in sharp contrast with the monotone clothing of the people. Their communication with their horses is near-perfect, at once more precise and more natural than modern dressage.

VIDEO #2: The sun has already set. There is no flash, and the picture is grainy, the hand holding the camera shaky. The villagers are gathered in their common. The one identified as Nura begins a chant. The others add their voices to the song at what seem to be ritual intervals.

"Was that the Kaddish?" Yona asked, stopping the camera. "It didn't sound entirely like Hebrew or Aramaic, but it somehow sounded a whole lot like the Kaddish." She didn't really have to ask; she had recited the mourners' prayer every day for the thirty days following Oliver's death in the hope it might bring peace of mind.

"Very similar," Odwa agreed.

"Is this another group claiming to be a lost tribe of Israel? Like the Lemba?"

"They don't claim to be anything at all. But one of the first anthropologists out here was a Jewish woman, from Sandton, and she noticed the similarities. Here is what we know: they have several characteristics that are more in line with desert peoples than the native tribes of this area. Semitic practices, skin tones, etc. Their butchering practices are similar to those of kosher or halal; the only meat they eat is goat and fish." He counted off the similarities on his fingers.

"But they're led by a woman?"

"No. All of the adults take turns leading rituals. Their prayers do sound like some of the oldest Jewish prayers: the Kaddish, the Shema. Their language derives from Syriac or Aramaic, but diverges from both."

Yona kept her eyes on the villagers as she spoke. "So they really may have come from the Middle East?"

"We believe they traveled down the length of the continent, ja. Their horses are genetically nearly identical to the Caspian horses of Iran, one of the oldest known breeds."

"And the people? Genetically?"

Odwa sighed. "Hard to tell."

"How so?"

He looked at her in the dark, then took a moment to remove his cap and reshape its brim. "You saw them disappear. We have not been able to convince them to let us do the types of testing we need to do. Yet. So we make guesses, for now."

"And what do your guesses tell you? About their origins and their—talent?" Yona reached for her water bottle to hide her impatience with his answers.

"I believe they must be from that area. But how do we explain the disappearing? We use the label 'transdimensional.' Transdimensional for the way they wink in and out. Here and gone. Zap. We think that wherever they go, they spend time there, too, even if they are gone from here for only an instant."

"And do the horses wink out as well?"

"Not that we've seen. Nor have we ever seen anyone drop a baby or appear in a fire, if you are going to ask that. Things they are holding go with them. They all leave together, every time. Group decision, but how they decide? We don't know." He shrugged.

"So you're telling me that I've spent my day taking photographs of 'transdimensional' beings who think they are ancient Jews? And all that talk about choosing what to shoot means you want me to keep all of the disappearing stuff out of what I bring back to my editor? You're going to ruin me."

Odwa smiled. "No. You are here to take photographs of a lost and isolated Semitic tribe, and convince the world that it is to this group's benefit to remain lost and isolated. My job is to stay here and protect them and someday figure out what they are and where they are from, and ja, why they have picked up certain Jewish rituals along the way."

"You know this all sounds ridiculous, right?"

"I know. You can choose not to believe me. You can keep taking pictures and decide later. I thought it might inform your photos a little bit if you realized exactly how isolated they are."

"Transdimensional," Yona repeated.

"Precisely."

"And what do they want for themselves?"

"We are still working on getting an answer to that. They leave when they are afraid for their group's safety, so we know they don't want to be overrun. They made it down the length of the continent, but they have been settled in this valley for some time, so we think it is reasonable to believe that they would like to stay here. Of course, that will not be possible if the complexities of their situation get out."

Yona thought about her options: documenting what she saw, or documenting what people expected to see. She wondered what Oliver would have done. The loss hit her again, fresh and bright and blooming. She wondered how long it had taken him to decide to put down his camera and become part of the story. He couldn't have had much time to make up his mind. An instant.

Maybe these people had an advantage over the rest of the world; maybe those times they disappeared really did last longer on the other side, wherever that was. Maybe when they blinked out together they had a chance to discuss with each other the ramifications of their decisions, to do more than hold each other and whisper reassurances and promises that could not be kept. Yes, you can intervene, but this will be the last moment we have with each other. Yes, my love, your life for his. I will try to understand.

SHOTS 71–83, VIDEO #3: The tribespeople sing. The song goes on long after the stars have come out, long after their voices have gone hoarse, long after the fire has dwindled.

SHOT 84: This picture was taken with a cellphone camera, by someone other than the photographer whose work is on display in this gallery. Yona Haifetz-Perec is the subject of the photograph. She is singing with the tribespeople, her face tilted toward the stars. ❍

Gold Ring

Found a gold ring in our backyard
Bright on new grassblades
One spring muddy morning
It didn't take a fire to find
An inscription — initials inside
That matched our neighbor's

It was her wedding ring
Lost scrambling in from a blizzard
And buried in new snow

Then blown
Over the fence
When the blower cleared the driveway

It wasn't much of a quest
To return it
And it didn't turn any of us invisible

But when you find a gold ring in the backyard
It makes a fairytale
Out of an April day

—Ruth Berman

ASK CITIZEN ETIQUETTE

Marissa Lingen

Marissa Lingen is a freelance writer living in the Minneapolis suburbs with two large men and one small dog. She's sold over ninety short stories to *Tor.com, Analog, Lightspeed,* and more. Her first tale for *Asimov's* takes on the complex world of the future. If we are to resolve difficult issues with diplomacy, it may be wise to seek advice from an expert.

Dear Citizen Etiquette:

My cousin insists on bringing her robot to all family gatherings. Am I obliged to hold events in robot-friendly surroundings to please her? If I do not, must I pay her robot's cleaning and retooling bills?

Signed,

Longing for the Beach

Gentle Reader:

Sand in the gears will ruin any 'bot's day, but that doesn't mean you have to keep your summers buttoned up for your cousin's robot's sake. Don't have every event somewhere that's unfriendly to machine people. That would be pointed. But just as you're allowed to get up an outing to an art museum without making sure your blind auntie is pleased with it, you may with no lapse in manners go to the beach. And if your cousin wants to bring her robot, let *her* clean the poor thing out herself. She's the one who insisted on bringing it.

Dear Citizen Etiquette:

My workmate will not stop talking about her pregnancy. I know she and her partner scrimped and saved for years to buy the best embryo possible, but do I have to listen to every single chromosomal choice they made? We are only ten chromosomes and four months into this discussion, and already I'm beginning to hate this child. What will I do when he's in nappies?

Desperately,

Love Your Baby But Not His Genechart

Gentle Reader:

Of course this is one of the most important decisions a person will ever make—but so was choosing her partner, and she didn't chronicle every particle of flirtation in the break room, did she? I hope not! But by the same token, no new mother wants to hear that her embryo is a bore. It's time for you to learn some of etiquette's oldest tools, the polite lies. "Oh, Gertrude," you will say, "I so wish I had the time to hear

more about your decision to go with hazel eyes instead of true green. But alas, our employer will be so put out with us if we do not finish the presentation by Thursday. I would hate to see Little Gertlet in a subpar preschool because we lost our situations." Perhaps it would be for the best if you left that last part as implication only, but you get the picture.

Dear Citizen Etiquette:
My neighbor keeps tuning his implant to a frequency close to mine. I fear he is overhearing the chats of an—ahem—personal nature shared between my spouse and me. Worse, I fear he means to! How can I make it clear that our facilitated telepathic exchanges are for our two minds alone?
Hopefully,
Alone In Our Own Little Corner of the RF Spectrum

Gentle Reader:
This is where modern technology's approximation of telepathy is, alas, only an approximation. Wouldn't it be charming to feel that you and your sweetheart are in a world of your own? But it is not so, and no amount of chiding, no application of manners, can make it so. You can gently hint, you can cajole, you can grab him by his fashionably wide lapels and declaim, "Now, look here, buddy!" But the airwaves are and ever more shall be the airwaves. Either invest in better encryption or resign yourselves to the idea that your private times will not be so private. Or may I suggest the old-fashioned idea of whispering your inmost thoughts in your beloved's ear? Crazy notion, I know, but it thwarts all but the most dedicated snooping neighbor—and if he plants a bug to hear you whispering, you'll have recourse to call in the authorities.

Dear Citizen Etiquette:
How do I explain to my friends and relations that I am the same person I was before I uploaded? My interests remain the same—I was never much of a golfer, and I can still play virtual holotennis with them, but I have always preferred a quiet chat and a good book to a walk on the beach. So what if I don't have legs now? Is that any reason to cut me out of their social plans?
Uploaded and Lonely

Gentle Reader:
Shall I get you in touch with the robot companion of the first writer's relative? Perhaps the two of you can have your quiet chat and a game of chess while your respective relations obsess about beaches. More practically, while it would be lovely if everyone's friends and family were open-minded about their decisions to become uploaded citizens, the simple fact is that not everyone will. "But the environmental impact—" I know. "But the health concerns of—" I know. "The political lobby of—" I know, I know, I know. The simple fact is that you cannot force your friends to want to invite you to do things socially. They will or they won't. What you can do is invite *them* to do things. Show them the best of the uploaded world, or those aspects of it that you can share with someone who is still flesh and blood. If they still never contact you, it's their loss.

Feeling overwhelmed by the social demands of the modern world? Write, text, or telepathic chat to Citizen Etiquette on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Problems solved and persons respected regardless of race, color, creed, gender, sexuality, chemical basis, or upload status. You pay communications charges please.)

STEPPIN' RAZOR

Maurice Broaddus

Maurice Broaddus <*www.MauriceBroaddus.com*> has written hundreds of short stories, essays, novellas, and articles. His dark fiction has been published in numerous magazines, anthologies, and web sites, including *Cemetery Dance, Apex, Black Static,* and *Weird Tales.* He is the co-editor of the Dark Faith anthology series (Apex Books) and the author of the urban fantasy trilogy, Knights of Breton Court (Angry Robot Books). Maurice has been a teaching artist for over five years, educating creative writing students of all ages. The author's first *Asimov's* tale takes place in a steampunk influenced Jamaica and provides us with a fascinating look at an alternate world history.

"Some people have written the story of my life representing as truth what in fact derives from ignorance, error or envy; but they cannot shake the truth from its place, even if they attempt to make others believe it."

—My Life and Ethiopia's Progress, Autobiography of H.M. Haile Selassie I

I. Crazy Baldheads

1988

Desmond Coke no longer jumped at the thunder of artillery in the sky. They were the weapons of the age. Born in violence, Jamaica had been settled by bloodshed and held by cruelty. The great thrumming sound from the passing airships bristled the skin. Dry brown vines crunched under his weight as he leaned against the cotton tree's steel grey trunk with little concern of dirtying his suit. From his hillside vantage point, he watched the familiar panorama play out through mountaintop haze.

Ominous shadows, like a shoal of slow moving whales, dove among the clouds. A flag emblazoned across each of their massive hulls, the crosses of three saints formed the Union Jack. Impassive and smug, the passing battalion represented little more than bloated saber rattling in the name of the Albion Empire. Their standing mission to raze Accompong Town amounted to a bombing raid on the well

fortified city. A vain effort, as the town, and much of the island, was reinforced to withstand hurricane assault, much less the tepid shelling of airships.

Accompong Town launched artillery shells loaded with witchfire, petroleum refined to a gel that blazed with lava's white-hot fury when ignited. Neither side veered near enough to the other to do any real damage. The same dance repeated every few months as Albion warships violated Jamaican airspace on their way to other islands. Ostensibly securing their foothold in the American colony, the so-called United States, any incursion was strictly for show. Albion had its hands full warring with the Five Civilized Nations of the northwest territories and the Tejas Free Republic of the southwest territories.

Waiting for the smoke to clear, Desmond pinched a pile of dried chiba leaves and rolled them into his spliff. Lighting his spliff and inhaling deeply, the smoke filled his lungs and came out in a ropey fog from his nostrils. The coarsely serrated alternate facing leaves of the chiba plants were to be admired in their own way. Versatile, it found its chief purpose through its intoxicating smoke.

The cotton tree scraped his back as he shifted. Maroons considered cotton trees sacred. They believed duppies danced among the branches of those rooted in graveyards, the spirits free to play and flit about at whim. Muddled superstitions to some, Desmond clung to the old ways when they served him. No one would search him out where Old Hinge, that particularly fearsome duppy, hung her skin on branches as a warning before making mischief.

The booms faded into a sputtering thunderstorm without rain. Distant rumbles no longer shook the ground and what passed for tranquility returned to the island. Desmond stabbed out his spliff against the tree and fixed a broken smile to his face, tucking the unsmoked portion into his pocket. Still in the rush of the heady smoke, his thoughts floated above reality, the world moving at a much slower pace as his languid steps took him back toward the Cobena Park estate. Crickets renewed their evening chirping. A damp heat clung to the air. Chickens dashed about, their fluttering wings objecting to his presence. A tinge of sorrow nagged him as he passed the wood shanties many of his brethren slept in when not in the fields. Young, listless, machete-wielding laborers who knew nothing of their heritage, up before sunrise; by moonrise still working. Even without the crack of the whip, without the smack of the cane, without a Massa to take away his pickney and sell them up the way. Unlike the Maroons, the rest of the Jamaican populace was made up of people who fled the Americas, the descendants of slaves. The Chinese. The Taino. Not to mention Albion's undesirables, her convicts, debtors, and dissidents. A proud tradition of exiles who settled the island but were not permitted to live in the Seven Cities of the Maroon.

His life wasn't his own.

Descended from the Ashanti people, the sixteen thousand Maroons formed the ruling class of Jamaica. The nation's immense wealth stemmed from its production of sugar cane and rum. And chiba, though no one discussed the herb in polite company. The Cobena Park estate was known chiefly for two crops: bananas and chiba. This allowed the family to own a number of indentured servants. Unlike in Albion or the Americas, Maroon servants were considered part of the family. That nuanced difference helped Jamaica's aristocracy lay their heads to pillow at night.

"What took you so long?" August Cobena asked from behind a table in the kitchen.

"I just now finished."

"Come, nuh." August raised both his arms and waited in the middle of the large drawing room. As Desmond neared him, he realized the man wore only his white silk jumpa and a pair of briefs, thankfully covered by the fall of the collarless shirt. August nodded toward the pile of kente cloth. Its silk and cotton material ran smoothly over his fingers, a dark green pattern accented by yellow and black threads.

Desmond draped the interwoven cloth strips around August, thinking the man too old to be diapered like a child. He'd always considered August Cobena an avaricious man, whose tiny eyes gleamed from within his large face with a faraway gaze, as though staring through whoever he spoke to in order to fix them on his next goal. Black moles freckled his cheek, his smooth skin, dark like calf hide. His nose was too thin for his face and he never quite shut his mouth, leaving his fat tongue to loll on the cusp of his lips as if forgotten.

Desmond dutifully wrapped the fabric around him, leaving the man's right shoulder and arm exposed, then allowing the remaining cloth to trail along the ground. It was a sign of prosperity, and August never allowed an opportunity to acknowledge the class differences between him and others to go unattended.

Gaslit fixtures adorned the walls. Strictly an affectation of wealth well worth the extra heat produced. Putting on a pair of slippers, August moved toward the bar and poured himself a finger of colorless rum from a crystal decanter. The first glass went down in a single gulp. As did the second. He lingered on the third.

"Are you ready?" Ninky Cobena's voice had both a nasal quality and a sing-song measure to it. Too tall, too loud, and too young—she was nearly thirty years August's junior—her wide hips and high breasts cut a remarkable profile despite her wrappings. Her kente wrap was the inverse pattern to August's: a rich yellow, with green patterns woven against black threads. She, too, wore her cloth around her body styled as a toga, over an undercloth of white lace. The other main difference was a red calico scarf wrapping her head like ivy around a statue, folded in half, tied and tucked. It accentuated her high cheekbones and full lips. Her every move was sure.

Desmond backed away from the man and took his place in the corner of the room. The fact that they spoke English was the only acknowledgement he was present. The Maroon spoke Asante-Twi when they were among their own and English when *obroni* were present. Patois was spoken only by the "common" people. Desmond sat between them, among them yet unseen at the same time. Such was the power of class and caste, an accident of shade. All the better positioned to glean scraps of discarded conversation.

"No, I'm not ready. What's the point? This whole estate is cursed."

"August, don't be that way." The stack of bracelets on her right wrist dropped to the middle of her arm with each gesture.

"Our fortunes dwindle. Our family name is . . ."

"Fine. It still carries much weight in the empire. The colonel still needs us." Ninky adjusted the drape of his cloth. She snapped her fingers and held out her hand without meeting Desmond's gaze. He unfurled his pocket kerchief and handed it to her. She dabbed at some imagined spot on August's collar. Though young, she was wise as a serpent. The rest of the staff feared being in her presence, as she had a bit of the dragon about her; however, Desmond was the personal attaché for August and didn't fear her wrath. He'd dealt with worse in his own mother.

"You need to take better care of your charge."

"Yes, mum." Desmond pocketed his kerchief. She hated to be called mum, complaining it made her sound old. Desmond insisted that it was about issuing the proper respect. Her irritation was a quiet benefit.

"But for how long?" August brushed her fussing hands away.

"Not all power is found in coffers," Ninky said, undeterred. "We have been invited to dine at the colonel's table tonight for a reason."

"How can you be so calm?"

"There's no point in treating it like a funeral dinner."

"It might as well be a last supper."

"Hush, my husband." Ninky fastened gold disks to her ears. She hooked her parasol to the crook of her arm. "Desmond, hurry up and get dressed, man. You will attend us tonight."

"Yes mum. Thank you, mum."

With one simple sentence, years of planning and waiting fell into place.

He would finally be close enough to kill the colonel.

II. Slave Driver

Perched high up in the mountains, the St. Elizabeth parish in western Jamaica bordered the western parishes of St. James and Trelawny. Some stretches were a desperate collection of galvanized zinc-topped shacks dotting the hillside, working up the nerve to declare themselves a town. Desmond called this "the Jamaica within Jamaica," the areas that existed between the megapolises and the stately king homes, far from the intrusive view of tourists. They still had a ways to go before they arrived at Accompong Town, named for one of the seven leaders who helped to liberate Jamaica from Albion.

The lush green of the hills was a sea of palmate plants. The sun hovered overhead. A smattering of rain burst from a seemingly cloudless sky, more of a sprinkling than a downpour, not even worth turning on the wiper blades. Desmond drove along the hard-packed dirt road—a one-way road with room enough for a single car—struck by how quiet the wealthy were when they had to be around each other. Stitched together by copper rivets, twin brass tubes outlined the body of the car. The vehicle wound along the tight roads, with Desmond availing himself liberally of the horn to alert on-coming vehicles or passers-by. Men walked along the roads armed with machetes, returning from their day's labor. Shirtless or with their shirt completely unbuttoned and untucked, they hard-eyed the conspicuous vehicle.

Desmond wound around another bend and slowed as several cars blocked the road.

"Is everything all right, Desmond?" August's voice cracked with concern. If he had his way, he'd either never leave his compound or be whisked by private airship to wherever he needed to go. That way he'd never have to risk his safety by mingling with common folk, as if secretly fearing that poverty was contagious.

"Looks like a *passa-passa*. Nothing to worry about."

"As if they can't entertain indoors like decent folk." Ninky craned about studying the burgeoning street party. "Well, I suppose they can't. Still, they shouldn't block the road. It's a public nuisance. Go see about it, Desmond."

"Yes mum."

The air smelled of fresh baked bread, body odor, and chiba smoke. Music swelled from the stack of speakers pressed into the cleft of the hill. Aggressive, angry drumbeats accompanied by electronic squalls focused through an electro-transmitter, its driving rhythms pounded the air. A rotating cylinder gyrated up and down within a glass-fronted cabinet, the delicate machinery protected by a brass framed cabinet. A series of antennae lined the top of the device, electricity arced between them. The charges climbed the spires, inching along like a self-winding string. Men shouted into the amplifier, toasting without hope, screaming the soundtrack to their life.

Desmond approached a mud-coated box-shaped vehicle. Paint flecked from its copper-enhanced casing like it was eager to be free of it. A group of men, cloistered by shadows, ambled toward him. Their eyes darted back and forth calculating an internal gamble of how much money Desmond's charges represented. With the air of predators on the prowl, any last one of the gathered men would bash his brains in

and leave him for dead, not bothering to drag his body out of the street. He adjusted the weight of his pistol. Ninky had insisted on him getting dressed, after all.

Another man pushed through the throng. His cream breeches dirty and loose, he was of the bush. Several welts marred his shirtless torso, probably from thumpings meant to correct too much spirit. His nest of dreadlocks tumbled from a multi-colored knit cap onto his broad shoulders, a sign of his covenant as an Israelite. He walked tall, meeting everyone's eyes, commanding respect like he had a gun in his pocket. Hands wizened and scarred, calluses ridged his fingers. He used a machete to split a coconut to drink from, then stabbed the blade into the earth beside him before sauntering over to Desmond.

"You fecka you! I should bust your jugular!" The man cocked his pock-marked face, fixing a cataract clouded eye on Desmond.

"Who do you think you're talking to, you mawga foot Rasta?" Desmond demanded.

The pair squared off against one another, wary eyes refusing to break their gaze. After a few heartbeats they broke up into laughter.

"You rude youth. No manners at all."

"Long time, Country."

Desmond clasped hands with the Rastafarian. Country and the law had an understanding of sorts. He was a top ranker in the Presidential Posse gang. The Albion colony of America issued a warrant for his arrest for trafficking narcotics. The way he evaded dragnets, frustrated American intelligence, and returned to Jamaican soil made him a hero to the people. Former actor, now puppet for Albion, Viceroy Ronald of the United States pressured the colonel to sign an extradition order but was told "We're Jamaica. We handle our own." Despite the bounty on his head in America, Country was safe in Jamaica. Though his ties to the Obeahists made him an enemy of the Kabbalists and the Kabbalists didn't care about borders. Or legalities.

"Where you off to with those *waitamigls*?"

"Dinner with the colonel. I'm supposed to clear your *passa-passa* so we can head on."

"You sup with the devil." Country sucked his teeth in disdain. "He would sell us to Babylon if he could."

"I know my duty. Now, I need to make this look good." Desmond did not relish his role as attaché, a glorified servant. Whenever he dealt with any of his "of the field" brethren, he wondered how they viewed him. His heart was with them, but because he was "of the house," a gulf separated them.

"Give me a nanny."

Desmond handed him a five hundred dollar bank note that pictured Grandy Nanny, the great freedom fighter.

"Nanny for Queen." Country held the note up to the firelight to make sure it wasn't a counterfeit bill.

"You think me a thief now?"

"Trust no shadow after dark."

The headlights, jutting cans more ostentatious than aerodynamic, slowly extinguished once the engine shut off. Desmond opened the door for the Cobenas. Ninky adjusted her wrap, then opened her parasol, a well-rehearsed gesture that gave time for August to come around and take her arm. When they were in place, she nodded at Desmond.

Desmond's lanky form bore the brown, single-breasted pinstripe suit with a scarecrow's bearing. Cut purposefully short, the jacket made his legs appear even longer. A pink shirt peeked from under the jacket, the corresponding pink stripes of the tie swirled against the alternating yellow stripes matching his pocket kerchief. The

brown overlaid with yellow repeated on his two-toned wing-tipped shoes. Desmond donned a pair of sunglasses that hid a third of his face and placed an unlit pipe in his mouth. He twirled a tan-handled cane once, signaling they were ready to march, then strode ahead of the couple. Only the highest ranking of the bourgeois dandied their servants for such an entrance.

Eschewing the gleaming metal structures of the Montego Bay and Kingston megapolises, immense white concrete buildings formed a court around Accompong Town's central palace complex, though functionally, the entire town was an extension of the palace proper. The people scurried about in frenzied anticipation. Every January 6—on the birthday of the rebel leader Cudjoe, brother to Nanny—the people came together for a festival in celebration of the peace treaty between Jamaica and Albion. A group of elders hunched over tables, slapping dominoes into place and making fun of each other's play. The women roasted a pig over an open fire. The ceremony required that they shred it, mix it with fresh rice—careful to add no salt to either—then go under the nearby cave to throw the food. Only after their ancestors' duppies were fed could they cook for themselves. Like the rhythm of waves crashing against a slave ship, music built in intensity as people sang of rebellion and emancipation. Others danced, invoking the spirit of their ancestors.

Desmond never knew his own birthday nor even how many he should have celebrated.

Giant stone lions policed the entrance to the palace. The stationed guards mirrored those of Albion's Buckingham Palace, except for black uniforms with gold epaulettes in place of Albion's eye-bleeding red. Despite Jamaica's independence, much of it echoed Albion. Even its flag, modeled on the St. Andrew's Cross, was reminiscent of the Union Jack except in black, gold, and green. Apologists claimed the intent was to jab a stick in the eye of the great British Empire, but Desmond had little use for Albion's fripperies.

Two of the guards remained in position by either side of the main gate while a third approached them.

"Who you with?" His gold cap tilted off to the side of his head as he scanned them.

"The colonel."

"Who you represent?"

"August Cobena of the Cobena Park estate."

Desmond didn't meet the man's hostility, which stopped just short of open aggression. The Maroon loved their *jijifo*, "evasive maneuvers" designed to wrong foot *obroni*. The more confused an outsider was, the more advantage the Maroon had. The guard relented without a smile.

"No harm. Just conversing. Make sure you not here on bad business. Your weapon will be checked and returned upon departure."

Desmond felt uneasy unarmed. He'd heard reports that Kabbalists were on the island. Despite being in the colonel's compound, he'd prefer to be able to address matters on his own if need be. But he wouldn't let that get in the way of his primary mission. He deposited his weapon into the waiting tray by his fingertips. They waited in the greeting hall of the palace, surrounded by the lacquered mahogany of curving banisters and the polished brass of the fixtures. Automata, constructed of porcelain with not even the slightest whir of machinery, took their coats.

At the blowing of an *abeng*, a retinue of a half dozen men paraded into the large hallway and lined up to face one another. Wearing tall, cream-colored Brodie helmets, long red jackets, and cream-colored pantaloons, they withdrew the cutlasses that hung at their sides and held them aloft to form an arch. A squat, mahogany-skinned man entered next. An Albion admiral's hat, too large for his head, canted at an odd angle, revealing closely cropped hair. A white silk coat hung from his shoul-

ders in order to allow his dark blue jacket to be appreciated, with its long tails and gold tassels on the shoulders like an infantryman. A thick cravat bowed at his neck. His breeches and boots completed the quasi-military appearance.

Colonel Malcolm Juba. Malcolm the First.

Over-sized, black-rimmed glasses masked a face ravaged by pox. A thin Van Dyke framed his mouth. Thick-necked, his gait had a bear-like quality to it. He often acted in a strange, wild manner, but by all accounts he was a brilliant chieftain. The way the colonel adopted British culture as affectation disgusted Desmond. There were those in certain circles who considered his lack of ideological purity worrisome. "Elected" every five years, typically running unopposed, an *osofu*, thirty-two members appointed by the colonel, assisted the Maroon leader. Despite being the highest ranking members of the *osofu*, August and Ninky genuflected in his presence.

The colonel stared through Desmond as if he wasn't in the room.

"August. Ninky. I'm so glad you could dine with us tonight." Used to being obeyed, Malcolm's voice had a thumbscrew timber, pressing down on all who heard him.

"We're honored," August said.

"Malcolm." Ninky's voice held a tone of total pleasure as she offered her hand. Thus they began their courtship of societal niceties.

"Please, come this way." Malcolm snapped his fingers.

Desmond had never met a pharaoh, but imagined it being much like this. Malcolm projected the essence of power, creating an aura about him as if he were the incarnation of a god. The procession passed the royal altar. The façade took up nearly the entire wall. Brass heads honoring the past colonels outlined the frame. Within the woodwork itself, several images formed scenes. Ninky's hard gaze stopped on it, studying its details.

"Do you know your history?"

"Everything's always a test with you, Malcolm," Ninky said.

"This time the question is a testament to the intricacy of the artisans' work."

His hand swept over a portrait of boats about to lay siege to the island.

"This was the forces of Albion in 1655, with their 'Western Design,' their offensive against the Spaniards who occupied Jamaica, two infant powers, wrestling over a tiny island plaything. But, even then, Albion revealed its hubris, sending only thirty-eight ships carrying eight thousand men—poorly equipped and poorly organized—to oust Spain's foothold. As if their mere appearance would carry the day. After all, who would dare oppose the will of the Queen?"

The scene moved to that of people opening doors to pens and fleeing. Malcolm stepped with a deliberate ease, ensuring all attention was on him.

"The sad reality of their overconfidence was that it worked on the Spanish. But before they retreated, the Spanish freed their slaves in hopes they would harry the English until they could return to re-conquer Jamaica. However, both sides underestimated the Maroon. To them we were savages and it was their duty to tame us. That was what the Spanish named us, you know. 'Cimarron' as in 'wild.' Untamed. We kept that name to show what the untamed spirit could do."

"To the British we were the Coromantee, after the slave forts on the Koramantine coast of Africa," Desmond said.

"Ashanti. Fanti. We were all the same shade of black to them. Your man knows his history, if not his place."

"My place?"

Four of the colonel's attendants assumed attack postures. Nothing too overt. August and Ninky probably didn't notice the spacing. They positioned themselves to neutralize Desmond with minimum fuss, but the cramped space worked to his advantage. He could think of eight ways to cripple them if they attacked. Nine if he

wanted to damage the artwork. Desmond smirked in spite of himself. The colonel nodded ever so slightly and the men backed down, assuming closer ranks.

"We don't attack *obroni* unless they move against us first. That is our way."

"Is that what I am now? *Obroni*?"

"It's all you ever were. You are a brown skinned man." Malcolm's voice held a sour note of disapproval. "Maroons are black."

All eyes studied Desmond, awaiting his reaction. His instinct was to rush the colonel. None of his attendants could reach him before he wrenched the man's skull from his neck. However, not one of the Niyabingi had gained such access to the palace, and he was obligated to learn as much as he could before completing his task.

Desmond swallowed hard before bowing. He stepped back, satisfying the colonel.

"Come, now." August clapped his hands. "The music, the art, it all is to celebrate our Independence Day."

"You're right, August. Come, we have much to discuss. And celebrate."

When they entered the dining room, Cuban mastiffs trotted up to greet the colonel. Such dogs at one time had been trained for man-hunting, unleashed on runaway slaves. Too many Maroons kept them as ironic pets. Custodians of their culture, the Maroon clung to the old ways as much as possible. All of the furniture was either mahogany or rosewood. Black lacquer cabinets accented with gaudy brass studs held sets of porcelain dolls. An empty Victorian birdcage stood in the corner. The entire design reminded Desmond of a plantation great house.

The attendants seated them around a mahogany table in a spacious salon, then lined up in formation against the back wall. They stood at rigid attention without sound or movement while the guests ate. They permitted Desmond to sit at a table off to the side. His plate served after the Cobenas', he finished quickly and sipped his tea. It was the finest tea he'd ever tasted.

An attendant poured Malcolm a libation from an array of bottles. Closing his eyes, he uttered a prayer in Asante-Twi. Desmond presumed this was to further remind him of his place as *obroni*. The Maroon loved their ceremonies.

"It has been 250 years since the end of the Maroon Wars, when Jamaica claimed its rightful independence. Becoming a beacon of hope in the west for Africans, a safe haven for runaways. But despite being that golden city on a hill, Jamaica is not without her problems."

"Do you mean the incident in Trenchtown?" August asked.

"That incident caused us to declare a state of emergency. We had schools and businesses shut down while armed vigilantes roamed the streets. We arrested their 'top ranker,' but we were forced to ally ourselves with ghetto strongmen to keep the peace."

"Such an action is not without precedent. We've always had community enforcers. Things have merely . . . evolved," Ninky said.

Desmond stifled the need to shift in his seat, instead choosing to sip his tea and betray no emotions. His father had been one of those gang leaders. Although he was romanticized as the Robin Hood of Trenchtown, Desmond clung to no illusions: his father was a drug dealer and weapons trafficker. The infamous Nesta Coke, up to his elbows in blood in the Rastafarians' war with the Kabbalists. A man of the people, never leaving the streets he was born into, he had risen to such folkoric heights of popularity, he'd been immortalized in song. The colonel couldn't have him killed or disappeared. But rumor skittered about that Nesta's location had been leaked to the Kabbalists. In the middle of the night they broke in and whisked him back to the United States. His father was burned to death in a prison cell in the American colony. That was how the colonel managed his alliances.

"We have grown stagnant," said Malcolm. "We have managed to avoid the culture of violence and absent fathers that so plagues our brethren in the American colony.

They are a people broken by the sting of the plantation and the lash. But the poison that afflicts their souls seeps onto our soil, like a virus searching for a host. Still, we have our *obayifo*."

"Obeah?" August asked.

The Rastafarian movement had grown to encompass all of the dissident wings. The Niyabingi fancied themselves as secret soldiers ready to put into action the will of the people. The Obeahists were more political, choosing more "practical" methods. Rumors abounded about the powers of obeah men and obeahmas. Some said they could separate their soul from their body. Could change a man's heart. Could make harm befall an enemy.

"So you know of the old religion?"

"I know that when the social order is maintained, no one turns to 'The Science.' But when things deteriorate, become chaotic, people return to the old ways."

"You make our arguments for us."

"Arguments for what?" August asked.

"We know of their plots. Most of them are little more than con men. But true practitioners of 'The Science,' their power lies in their ability to poison. Wouldn't you agree, Ninky?"

"I wouldn't know." Ninkey straightened and turned to him without a smile. "I pay as much attention to them as I do tales of duppies."

"'Duppy dead out' in the age of reason, but not for those of 'The Science.'"

"Surely you're being paranoid," August said.

"Perhaps. But you know the mark of a skilled politician? To make allies from enemies." Malcolm sipped from his drinking horn.

Desmond had heard the rhetoric before. No politician ever came out and admitted that many of the street level gangsters worked at their behest, thus creating the very problems they could come in and solve. Profiting at both ends of the situation. It was quietly feared that the colonel was in his heart a neocol, a tacit supporter of the movement to join the Albion empire, pining away for the rule of British law and order. Nostalgic for imperial glories, the colonel reminded Desmond of a former slave who didn't know what to do with his freedom, so desperate to retain his master's "protection" and attention.

"But we are Jamaicans. We're well off. We're free," Ninky said.

"We have a poverty of values. We have a poverty of caring. We have a poverty of education. We have a poverty of responsibility. We have a poverty of time. We're not free until all of us are completely free. And Emperor Selassie shall point the way."

"Colonel, if I may," August said. "I still don't see why we are here. And my apologies, but the ways of the Rastafari hold little interest to . . ."

Malcolm raised his hand to cut off August. A young boy stood in the doorway. Not like other pickney, his skin was dark as midnight and his eyes the palest of green. His white collared shirt and black slacks had the appearance of a uniform. He moved with a quiet elegance. Malcolm studied their reactions to the boy.

"And who might this little one be?" Ninky asked.

"Lij," Malcolm said.

"Lij? What an unusual name," August said.

"Names have power."

"You sound like a Kabbalist. Is he your nephew? A child of your staff?"

"No. Lij is our guest of honor." Malcolm's voice grew throaty, with a hint of gloating

"I still don't see . . ." August said.

"Talk and taste your tongue. You have a decision to make. We can end dinner here having enjoyed some pleasant conversation . . ."

"Or . . ." Ninky said in a wary, but curious tone.

"Or we can go deeper. We can show you things you may not be ready for, but which can take both you and our people to a whole new level."

"What is it?" August asked, a foolish grin plastered on his face as the prospect intoxicated him.

"Anymore we cannot say. In fact, words cannot do justice to it. What we have to show you must be seen and experienced to be understood. But once you have seen it, your lives won't be the same. They may even be forfeit."

"Forfeit?" Ninky asked.

"That's the wager. Knowledge, power, and wealth are all possible. The choice is yours."

Desmond couldn't name what woke him. Despite the whir of the fans blades, the night was sticky with a cloying humidity punctuated by his own sweat. The buzz of mosquitoes irritated his ears. He rolled over in bed, unable to get comfortable, as if an ill-placed spring poked him in the back. When he did drop into sleep amid his fitful tosses, he suffered nightmares, dreaming of fire.

The air had changed. The pressure in the room dropped, maybe from a door opening down the hall. The creak might have been an old floorboard settling. However, August paid him to indulge his paranoia; heeding his uneasiness was a professional hazard. The palace prohibition disallowed him from walking about the grounds dressed, but there was undressed and there was undressed. Desmond grabbed his cane.

Wearing only his white undershirt and hastily donned breeches, Desmond crept along the hallway barefoot. The strange quiet of the house put him on edge. The entire guard had disappeared, as if he'd wandered into a deserted duplicate of the palace. It couldn't have been coincidence. It would explain why the colonel had his own personal attendants on top of palace security. Anyone could be reached. Paranoia meant life.

At the end of the colonnaded balconies, the palace grounds led into shaded groves. Many considered it a modern marvel with its hanging gardens of genetically enhanced plants, species that existed nowhere else in the world. Put together with an artist's eye, the explosion of vibrant color was visible even from the byway. The gardens were world renowned. They had been constructed in the 1860s, and their cinchona plants were cultivated for their quinine, an antidote for malaria. This became a key export to Albion. Malcolm had hundreds of exotic palms from around the planet planted. Fan palms from Mauritius, hurricane palms from the Maldives, all against a landscape of red African tulips, lilac-colored hydrangeas, blue azaleas and the like. An artificial stream coursed through the gardens to the melody of birds of paradise.

A shadow darted between the trees. If the figure were after the colonel, he couldn't be allowed to succeed. Not when Desmond was so close to finding out all of the colonel's secrets and the Rastafari so close to ending his threat once and for all. Desmond chased after him. The figure hoped to elude him among the trees, but Desmond had spent his share of time around the Cobena Park estate. The snapping of branches and the scurry of dead leaves gave away the would-be assassin's position. Eventually he realized it too, and he whirled on Desmond in a sudden lunge. Dressed in all black, his goggles glowed a dull green. A series of canisters were slung across his shoulder, like a shotgun ammo belt. The man had some acrobatic training. He danced about with incredible grace, a springiness to his steps as he rolled to his feet. Desmond leapt out of his way, dodging the first thrown punch.

Desmond tugged his cane, freeing the metal core from its sheath. He clutched the sword in one hand, but held the shaft of his scabbard with the other as if wielding two long sticks. He struck no vital areas as the dull thumps he landed battered the man's side.

Desmond parried the next blow using his scabbard and then ducked in what seemed to be a carefully choreographed dance. The assailant fought high, most of his attacks directed at Desmond's chest and head, with little power behind them. Crouched low, weight on his right knee, Desmond swung the sticks. The man raised his left leg, frozen like a resting crane, while fending off the blows. The two were fairly matched, neither man seemed to be able to press his advantage over the other. The clash of batons clattered in a flurry of wild swings.

His life was not his own. Desmond had been claimed and trained by the Niyabingi from the time of his father's death, another weapon in their war. Falling back on his training, Desmond spun in a clockwise kick that swept the man's legs. He allowed the momentum of his attack to carry him through; his cane and scabbard batted the man's arm and thigh. It was like hitting steel reinforced enough to hold off a dreadnought. Desmond dodged the wide arc of his assailant's next blows.

An *abeng* blew, alerting the guards. Ceramic automata whisked along the pathway. The man glanced around, then sprinted toward the outer wall, clearing it with short, agile leaps. On the other side lay a low drop off into the thick of the grove. The assailant knew his exit strategy.

Desmond slid his cane back into its case. A glint of metal drew his eyes. A fallen canister slick with moisture. He daubed his fingers and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. Oil stained the grass.

"Well met, sir." Malcolm, escorted by his personal attendants, applauded as he approached.

"I suspect he was a Kabbalist agent. He had training," Desmond said.

"As have you."

"I am August Cobena's personal attaché. He wouldn't have hired me if I had not been. The man also dropped this." Desmond opened the canister before Malcolm could protest. "A gel of some sort. What is it?"

"Don't." Malcolm warned and continued in a tone that didn't invite discussion. "All will be explained. As we probably won't find slumber for the rest of the night, perhaps we should start our day a little earlier than we'd planned. Anything else you'd like to ask?"

"No, suh." Desmond stopped just short of falling into patois, hoping for the right measure of reserve and deference.

Malcolm's grin widened, a lolling crocodile smile.

III. Jah Live

The palace limousine—a brass engine the length of a train car whose pistons stammered and hissed as steam escaped—drove through the ruins of Nanny Town. The symmetry of the surrounding houses probably went unnoticed to the untrained eye, but Desmond knew their history. In shouting distance of one another, the houses formed a natural relay of communications should power, or technology, fail them. It was the way of Cudjoe, Nanny, Accompong, and the other military leaders who had fought and expelled the Albion forces.

Nanny Town had been completely leveled during an Albion raid, but the Maroon left the ruins standing as a solemn reminder of their fate should they ever lower their guard. People said that the duppies of those who died in the battle still haunted it.

Though the vehicle hit every bump in the poorly kept roads, the jarring movement barely jostled Malcolm. He locked his regal stare on August as he addressed him. Ignoring Desmond.

"We're almost here." A leather strap draped like a gun belt over the shoulder of corded epaulettes on yet another blue uniform. Medals in the shape of baroque crosses adorned his chest, though what war service he'd actually seen was unclear. Gold braids wrapped at his cuffs and wound up to his elbow. A plumed hat nested between him and one of his attendants.

"Old Town?" Flanked by Ninky and Desmond, August sat across from Malcolm. He tried to match the mood of the occasion; his full-length leopard print robe flowed to his ankles. He passed his gold staff from hand to hand, never quite getting the proper position for it, and appeared uncomfortable under his necklaces of beads.

"In the shadow of Cudjoe's tomb. Rather fitting, don't you think?"

"Malcolm, I don't wish to speak out of turn, but all are forbidden to be here. This area, it's . . . sacred."

"Another most fitting description, August. Come, you are among the first to see the wonders that await."

Desmond couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd eaten. As attaché, he ate after his charges did, before them if they suspected an attempted poisoning. All told, it wasn't as bad as when he was a child and his belly grumbled worse than a field hand without chiba. He exited the car first and stood at attention, allowing the length of his black jacket to fall to his knees. He wore charcoal colored trousers, his light gray gloves matched his shoes and tie. An orange and yellow boutonniere was pinned to his lapel. For a moment, he closed his eyes against the heat, as if force of will alone would prevent his sweating. Malcolm nodded his approval before donning his hat.

Malcolm's attendants lined each side of the door to escort them. A gravel path veered from the road toward a stand of trees, one of which stood apart from the others. Ninky wandered toward them and stopped before the Kindah Tree. A sign at its base read "We are Family." She genuflected and knelt.

"You recognize this tree?" Malcolm put a gloved hand on her shoulder.

"It's Cudjoe's tree." Ninky kept her eyes closed. "Only the high ones are allowed to pilgrimage here once a year. But the sign . . . it's unmistakable."

"This is where Albion sued for peace," Malcolm told August, though he seemed just in need of an audience. "Albion's Colonel Guthrie, as a sign of friendship, switched hats with Cudjoe. It's where we began the tradition of dubbing our rulers Colonel. Come, we have just a little further to go now."

This was the Jamaica Desmond knew. Not the megapolises, not the kings' houses, not the tourist traps as people arrived to gawk at their culture like some sort of zoo exhibition. But this, the earth beneath his feet, the measured breeze. The memories of scooting up coconut trees and dropping fruit down to the waiting arms of his brothers. Sipping the barely sweet milk under the shade of banana leaves. Of swimming in underground caves where the town drew their water.

He was of the people left between the politicians and the wealthy and the Maroon. He hated that sewage trickled along the streets of his hometown, that so many of them had been crammed together and forgotten, treated like second class citizens by their darker brethren. He was the hate that hate built, fired by neglect, and patient as the ocean.

They continued down a path that led from the secluded area deeper into the bush. Royal embroidery trimmed Ninky's bright red Raija Kaftan and matching head scarf. Embellished with small mirrors, a print of shadow people, each carrying their own burden, trailed up the Kaftan. August took Ninky's hand, steadying her as they walked. Their sandals weren't made for treks through the fields and their ankles often buckled over the unsteady terrain. But they uttered nary a wince as they walked, as if not wanting to give satisfaction to Malcolm, who made his way as surefooted as a goat.

"You are about to enter Peace Cave," Malcolm said. "From this location Cudjoe launched his attacks against Albion. Over the years, we have made . . . modifications to it."

The mouth of the cave was hidden from the casual observer. A cadre of soldiers patrolled a clearing. Recognizing Malcolm, they saluted. A lone guard escorted them into the cave mouth. He relieved Desmond of his cane and August of his staff. They wouldn't need such affectations, they were informed. Gaslit glass bowls burned to life at their entry, illuminating their path. The sounds of rushing water echoed from off in the darkness down an unlit side path as they made their way toward the rear of the cave. The path wound around crags of jutting stone until they reached an alcove. A hidden door slid out from the rock, closing them off. The pit of Desmond's stomach leapt as the room dropped.

"Colonel?" August reached for a handhold along the wall.

"It is all right. We're simply plunging deeper into our story. It's still not too late to turn back."

"We've come too far for that now."

Ninky said nothing, but met Desmond's unerring gaze with her own steely one. Desmond turned away.

"We'd rather hoped you'd say that, August. We know you have long had an interest in our technology," Malcolm continued.

"I . . . yes."

"This is a place of questions. And wonders. Within these confines, our research follows two areas, the physical and the biological, yet manages to meet in the realm of the spiritual."

The platform stopped before a twin set of doors.

"I don't understand."

"The forces of 'Babylon' array against us," he said.

"Now you sound like one of the Rastafari," August said.

"They are one of the many groups we are called to govern over. One of the many bedfellows we have had to build relationships with. So many disparate voices with no greater vision uniting them beyond our rule. We've held off Albion for centuries. We battle not against just Albion, but all of their principalities. Colonialism. Classism. Imperialism. Materialism. These are the things that threaten us. Things from which we need liberation."

"But these are . . . ideas."

"Ah . . . now you see the crux of the matter. How do you fight an idea?" Malcolm donned white gloves. "With a bigger idea. We need a return to old ways. Simpler ways. We've lost our moral compass. Our task isn't to take on Babylon, but to free it. *Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.*"

Desmond had seen this too often before: politicians using the religious beliefs of their people as propaganda to further their agenda. He bided his time. Dressed or not, he would find a way to solve the problem of the colonel once and for all.

"Colonel," August said in a deliberate tone, as if not wanting to disturb an ill-balanced mind. "Perhaps you'd better start from the beginning. Where does all of this come from?"

"You weren't there on that day. April 21, 1966."

"When Haile Selassie visited Jamaica?" Ninky asked. "You were there?"

"When he visited, when he first stepped from his airship, oh the joy, the love in the air. The first African head of state to visit our shores. The Roaring Lion. So quiet, but radiating such . . . power. Like a balm on the people, draining the poison from our souls and casting a vision for a new Jamaica."

Desmond perked to attention at the mention of the name and the blessed day.

Grounation Day was the Rastafarians' second holiest day of the year. While they spoke, Desmond scanned the lab. A scalpel lay on a table's edge. He detested being undressed. It was an easy palm and Malcolm was more concerned with showing off his gadgets and tubes. A thought nagged him as he wondered why they would need scalpels down here.

"What is it they say?" Malcolm glanced at Desmond and then back to his guests. "'*The older the moon, the brighter it shines*'? We are an old, old moon. To see Emperor Selassie, to realize he was divinely appointed and could deliver us from the ways of poverty and emptiness, it changed our life. We're here now. First, let us show you the next generation in our defense."

Malcolm barged through the doors. People in long white coats scurried about under an azure light. Coils of wire ran between wood planks and metal sheets. The thrum of dynamos filled two adjacent rooms. The energy crackled from one glass sphere to another. The hair along Desmond's exposed wrist and neck stood on end. The energy's intensity almost formed a wall for them to push through. Desmond couldn't begin to calculate the profligate sums spent building this complex or assembling the machinery inside.

"Here we use the forces of attraction and repulsion to create an electromagnetic cannon. With it, we can fire rockets with exploding ordinance or use the energy of lightning. Leave the steam to Albion."

"Such power. I can feel it along the skin." August's voice took on an enraptured tone.

"That's the thing about power: it is always felt. As we speak, our dynamos are under construction about the seven cities. In fact, by Albion's next incursion over our airspace, we will see them greeted in a manner that will discourage further breaching of our shores."

"This is magnificent, Malcolm. Why keep it a secret?" Ninky asked.

"Because our scientists are also experimenting with harnessing what they call ectoplasmic resonance. It's a power source derived from the residual energy of spirits who have left us."

"Duppies?"

"As we said, 'duppies dead out' in the age of *true* science. It is only one piece in a greater puzzle."

"It's . . . abhorrent," Desmond said. Duppies weren't just the spirits of their ancestors. They were their cultural heritage. Stories passed down, parent to child, which connected them to their past. Malcolm was tampering with the fabric of his people and didn't realize it. Or worse, didn't care. "My apologies, mum."

"We suspect you voice what your mistress thinks, so we forgive you the impertinence. Let me explain: long have we been frustrated by the ways of Albion."

"As have we all," August said.

"Well, specifically, the moral decline rotting them from inside. They worship at the altar of science and enlightenment, the sun never sets on their empire, yet they don't seem to progress as quickly as they ought. Here it is, 1988, and their world decays for lack of vision."

"What twisted game do you play at, Malcolm?" Ninky asked.

Malcolm arched an eyebrow at her, irritated but in control.

"Come, see our second laboratory."

Another set of doors hummed open and closed as they entered the laboratory. Desmond checked his pocketwatch. The early hour of the day still had him unsettled and his belly reminded him of that fact. When he glanced up, he spied the boy from dinner approaching, wearing all white, with gold embroidery along the V of his chest and around a matching hat. Two guards escorted him. Eyes wide and alert, the boy

took it all in without a trace of fear. He walked as though preoccupied with his own imagination, lost in young boy thoughts, but with eyes older than any man Desmond knew. It was all right there in those not-quite-right eyes of his. His stride was at ease and confident, each step his own regardless of how many guards surrounded him. The guards avoided his gaze, keeping a careful distance from him.

The boy turned to Desmond and in that moment Desmond felt the physical thrust of his body failing him in inches. The taste in the back of his mouth stolen. The faint scent in the back of his nostrils swept away. A wave rippled through him as if he were a dime novel whose pages were being rifled through. Scrambling and scribbling, desperate to find a corner of himself to call his own. Yet, for all the terror in that instant of unraveling, Desmond had the overwhelming sensation of being free. Loved. All of his secrets, all of his burdens, all of his plans and agendas, all of the lies he told himself to get out of bed and face the day—day after day after day after day—he no longer had to do it. All in a single gaze. A terrible, knowing, kind gaze.

Dismissing the guards with a gesture, Malcolm took the stairs leading to a dais.

"All living things are made up of discrete units called cells," Malcolm began. "If a two-celled sea urchin were put into a beaker of sea water and shaken until the cells separated, each cell would grow separately and form a whole sea urchin. One identical to the other. However, creatures as simple as sea urchins pale in comparison to the inherent complexity of human beings. Look at us: glorious creatures created in the image of Jah. Maroon, Jamaican, African, Albion, we continue in form and function, diversity, robustness, and variety, all from the mating of two sexes. Physiques, predilections, mayhaps even disposition such that echoes from generations past could emerge again as if plucked from time. Or the body's memory. To understand this is to know the mind that could create such intricacies, such elegance, such . . ."

"Order," August said.

"Precisely."

"What do you propose?" Ninky asked.

"Cutting out the middle men. What if we could take inert cells, infuse them with life energy, and allow them to grow. Layer upon layer, knitted together in a chamber like a series of micro-machines in a glass womb."

"It sounds a lot like the Kabbalists and their tales of golems."

"The Kabbalists, like the Rastafarians, have their own interpretations of the Old Testament, seeing mystic portents in everything. Numbers. Letters. Names. But perhaps they aren't the only ones interested in working out the ways of the Tree of Life."

Ninky approached one of the glass bowls, the murky liquid obscuring all visibility. She touched it and immediately withdrew her hand. She turned from the glass bank and staggered back.

"This ectoplasmic energy, this energy of life . . . Malcolm, tell me about the boy."

"You always were the clever one, Ninky. He who controls the naming controls life. There is great power in names. Haile Selassie was born Tafari Makonnen, and became the King of Abyssinia."

"What have you done?"

"He is a copy created in a laboratory after years of attempts. A number of failed . . . growths. But we dissected, studied, and learned from our mistakes."

"He's an abomination. His eyes . . ." Ninky's voice trailed off.

"There was a defect in his eyes. Yet, the green hue adds to his unique status. Otherwise, he's just a boy. An extraordinary boy."

This changed everything. The Order of the Niyabingi existed to fight imperialism wherever they found it, even in their own mad despots. But long had they waited for the Great King from the East to deliver them. Desmond had prayed with holy impatience for that day to come. Some dark nights, he believed he waited in vain, but

those were few and far between. Emperor Selassie was theirs. Unfiltered through others' experiences. No need for clergy or hymnals or translations or interpretations. And now, if everything the colonel said was true, he was here. After a measure.

"All we needed was a sample from *HIM*. As befitting his destiny, his conception was on Grounation Day four years ago. Lij Tafari. *Lij* means 'child,' but one day he will be *Ras*. *Ras* means 'head,' head of a way of life. The messiah who will lead the peoples of Africa and the African Diaspora to freedom. Such is the power of names."

"There is a greater power in the *namer*. Is that what this is truly about?" Ninky asked.

"What we need is faith and pride. Our people have lost their way. Soon, they will find themselves on the same path as Albion: fat, lazy, sick on their own excesses. We need someone to lead us. Who better than the Messiah, descendent of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba?"

"What you propose is madness. What about those who disagree with you?" Ninky asked.

"Disagree. Agree. As those in Albion deal with Kabbalists, we have Obeahists. Even in my own cabinet. Not to mention the various factions collectively called Christians. The Maroon may dictate the caste, but we are still the minority."

"So you appeal to the Rastafari to help wrangle the voices?"

"Appeal? No. Venerate their story? Yes. The greater the vision, the more people want to believe."

"The bigger the lie . . ." Ninky sucked her teeth.

"So you say."

"Colonel, this is so . . . big," August said.

August was never a strong man. His mother was the source of their family's strength. She had the dragon about her, too. August enjoyed the entitlement of being a Cobena but lacked the steel to wield the power that came with such a family. His face too soft, all jowls, he quaked as if he were ready to blubber.

"What would you have from us?" Ninky's hard gaze was a mix of consternation and irritation.

"Ever pragmatic. We want your support and, as need be, your silence. Next November 2 we celebrate Emperor Selassie's coronation day. We will also be celebrating two hundred years of independence. On that day, Lij will be presented to the world. Until then, we ask that you begin to take him in as his parents and raise him as your own."

"This is . . . a lot to absorb," August said.

"Oh, I don't expect your decision today. However, you shall remain my guests until you've made up your mind."

IV. Exodus

Desmond dreamt of fire and awoke to the darkness gripping his throat. Wiping his mouth of pooled saliva, he stank of his own sour sweat. In the distance the familiar booms echoed as Albion harried the other side of the island for a change.

Things had gone so wrong since Peace Cave. His Niyabingi cell leaders no longer trusted him, each communication tinged with suspicion. All he'd reported was dinner with Malcolm and vague hints about a possible lab he couldn't access. They suspected he knew more than he let on, especially with Malcolm's elite guard now stationed about Cobena Park. He was as trapped as the Cobenas, playing for time until he could figure out his next move.

His stomach rumbled. Desmond snuck toward the kitchen of the Cobenas' main house. Worldly problems always seemed less dire on a full belly. These days, even simple trips to the kitchen required dodging patrols and avoiding the rear door's sentry. But he knew the grounds better than any of the colonel's men.

The kitchen smelled faintly of ginger and curry. Fruit flies buzzed around oranges on the counter. A pot of goat belly soup remained in the refrigerator, with the yams a little hard, the way he preferred them. The family wouldn't miss a bowlful.

"You come knick me potatoes?" Ninky asked in faux patois. She sat cross-legged on the corner stool, hidden by the deeper shadows of the kitchen. When she leaned forward, her hair, plaited in two at the side, fell past her nightdress' bosom. And she seemed much, much older. The few months since their visit to the cave had worn on her. As had the company of soldiers attached to their house to "ensure their safety."

"Sorry fe mawga dog, mawga dog wi tun round bite you." Desmond exaggerated his accent and smiled. Reaching for the refrigerator handle, he waited for Ninky's nod before proceeding. "May I ask a *fool-fool* question?"

"You go on play the fool to catch wise," Ninky said. "You don't deceive me. You see more, hear more, and know more than you let on."

"I'm like a fly on the wall. No one notice flies until they buzz around."

"And that's when they get swatted. What's your question?"

"What do we do next?"

"We?"

"Let's say that I have . . . friends. I joined up with them because I had nowhere else to belong. I studied with them. I trained with them. Not everyone agrees with my friends, what they believe in, or how they go about doing things."

"They sound like dangerous friends to keep."

"And yet, a person like myself, with the kind of friends that I have, no matter how hard we might try to remain discreet, would not be allowed near certain factions without a benefactor. Perhaps an obeah man. Or obeah ma. Someone to provide an umbrella of protection, never anything overt, merely provide access."

"You dance around topics and never speak plain."

"You never know who may be listening." Desmond took out the scalpel he'd swiped from Peace Cave. It was tangible proof the experience had been real. Besides Lij. But the boy loomed too . . . large in his mind. He cleaned his nails with it. "Nanny for Queen."

"Nanny for Queen. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No, mum."

Ninky withdrew a long spliff. She licked its side then lit it. The heady aroma of chiba filled the kitchen.

"In some circles, chiba is considered sacred. A rite. Would you like to share this?"

"Yes, mum."

Desmond took the spliff but didn't take his eyes from Ninky. The cigar tasted of her. He sucked deep and held the smoke before returning it to her.

"Speak . . . as if you were among friends," Ninky said.

"The colonel is a madman. A dangerous and powerful madman. He's creating a mythology for the people. Lij must be seen as coming from them. The Kabbalists are his primary obstacle."

"Feh. For all their talk of working out the Tree of Life and the mysteries of the Divine Throne, all they are amounts to Albion business interests who have formed a cabal. Mystical nonsense as cover to keep their numbers small and their manipulations of the market secret."

"Lij represents technology. Secret knowledge, tru, but money to be made, moreso. In the mean time, you play the blessed parents of the Messiah."

"I don't play the virgin well," Ninky said.

Desmond choked on his smoke. He waved off another hit.

"The Messiah, *His Imperial Majesty*, grows up before the people, rallying and inspiring them. The colonel offers to have Lij stay at the palace, heir apparent, all the while brainwashing him. Assuming he hasn't already done so."

"I don't think he has. Some part of him, whatever deep corner of him that remains unspoiled and decent, knew that for Lij to ring true, he had to be his own man at first." Desmond recalled the boy's gaze.

"It's a risky gambit."

"He's tightening his grip on power from all sides. Even if it fails and he doesn't win the heart of the people, his technology and military will garner him their loyalty."

"If you can't be loved, be feared. Lij represents a powerful symbol. In the right hands."

"Are we the right hands?" Desmond asked.

"You are. But you can't remain here. He's too young and it's too dangerous here."

"So we run?"

"I fear I am too much of a coward. Besides, they watch my every movement. However," Ninky stood up and walked toward the door, "a fly who knows how to avoid being swatted, an old fly . . ."

"Me old, but me nuh cold." Desmond smirked.

"Watch your step, my dear, and walk good."

The sun glowed red, the waking dawn over the rain-soaked land. The loamy smell of earth filled the groves of palms. The hills were colors caught on a painter's brush: lilac, grey, and blue-green. An *abeng* blew its mournful wail in the distance. During the Maroon Wars it warned of a British marauding party. Now it signaled that the hunters drew near.

"I'm scared." For all of his aplomb and cool-headedness, Lij was still a boy. A boy woken in the still of the night to a hand over his mouth and a voice telling him to hush and trust.

"It's only a little bit further. Then we'll be safe," Desmond said.

"You promise?"

"I'd like to. I probably should. But I can't. I can promise I'll be by your side as long as I'm able."

Desmond worried that he sounded more like a lawyer trying to hedge than a paternal figure. But he wanted to be as honest, as realistic, as possible. His heart wanted to tell of promises broken, of men he loved dying in flames. Those were the world's life lessons.

"Where are we going?" Lij asked.

"To visit a friend. But we have to be careful. There are a lot of people, bad people, looking for us. But I know the Blue Mountains. Those soldiers will go round and round in circles, probably fall into the same pit traps that ambushed Albion Redcoats while we hide in back-o-water caves."

"Is he a good friend?"

"We're close as batty and bench."

The boy stared with those pale green eyes, large as an owl's. Desmond didn't have much of a plan beyond sneaking past the guards and evading patrols long enough to get to Country. Lij took his hand. The boy still trembled.

Desmond spent his life looking in, watching others live their lives. To the Maroon, he was *obroni*, an outsider, as were all of the brown people. Desmond had no place among his own, as they considered him "a man of the house." He couldn't tell them what he'd sacrificed for them. In the Cobena house, though high ranking, he was

considered a servant. His family had Rastafari roots, but he had not joined, only been a sympathizer. And once the conservative Bobo Ashanti sect of the Rastafari assumed control, even non-member allies were considered outsiders. When Desmond examined his life with true eyes, he realized he was alone. He soldiered on anyway, knowing he'd find a place where he belonged and held that hope close.

"How about I tell you a Br'er 'Nansi story to pass the time? My mother used to tell me Br'er 'Nansi stories all the time when I was your age. I hated them. Thought she was just a silly old woman. I didn't know the power of stories then. Now I miss them. Would that make you feel better?"

Lij squeezed his hand.

"There was a mad witch who hated her name. Wherever she went, she never told anyone her true name. Names have power and she knew that her name was the source of her power. To say it would be her undoing."

"What was her name?" Lij asked.

"If I tell you, you have to keep it to yourself. You promise?"

"I promise." Lij smiled. It was the first time Desmond had seen the boy do so. In that moment all Desmond knew was that he wanted to keep him safe forever.

"It was Five. The witch ruled the land. Everyone was scared of her power. She cursed fields and the gungoo pea roots would shrivel. She cursed the goats and their meat would rot on their bones. Everyone put up with her madness, giving her anything to keep her happy. Everyone except Br'er 'Nansi."

Desmond pulled Lij low when a car neared. Its headlights skimmed over them. The bush limbs above them looked like interlaced fingers. He waited a few seconds after they could no longer hear it before they continued.

"Br'er 'Nansi was the craftiest of the animals. And he was old. He knew the true names of all the old ones, from Br'er Turtle to Old Hinge. He couldn't let his brethren tremble at the thought of the witch."

"That doesn't sound like Br'er 'Nansi," Lij said. "He's usually greedy. Selfish."

"Sometimes people change from one story to the next. Br'er 'Nansi went to the village of the witch, right up to her house and banged on her door. When she opened the door, he stood there holding an armful of bananas and weeping.

"*Someone has stolen my bananas,* Br'er 'Nansi cried out. *I don't know how many the thief took.*

"*How many did you have?* the witch asked.

"*I was told six, but I don't know how to count. Can you please help me?*

"*There are one, two, three, four, and the one in your hand.*

"*I don't know any number called 'the one in your hand,'* Br'er 'Nansi said. *Does it come before nine? Wait, do you mean Five? Five! What a lovely number, an even better name. Everyone should know it. Everyone should shout it, drag it from the shadows into the light where it can be known and no longer feared.*

"The witch was angry. No one enjoyed having their secrets brought to light. She chased Br'er 'Nansi all through the hills, spitting her curses and threatening to kill him as soon as she found him. 'Nansi hid in a medicine bag around the neck of an obeah woman bound on a ship heading for the New World. Even though it was against his will, he didn't mind.

"*My life is not my own,* Br'er 'Nansi said. *I will comfort my people wherever I find them.*"

"His life was not his own," Lij repeated.

Desmond hated the death of innocence that came with understanding life.

Bamboo poles lined the front of a ramshackle house. White, green, and red flags fluttered from each of the poles signifying that a "science man" occupied the house.

Burglar bars girded every window. Corrugated metal formed the roof, its ridges trailing down to large buckets that collected rain run-off.

Country leaned his chair back against the wall, eyeing his dominoes with great suspicion. A tam covered his dreadlocks, which drew forward on his forehead every time he furrowed his brow. A lone lamp lit the porch. The other men huddled tight around the table studying his every movement. A smile crept across his face. He slapped a tile onto the table. Curse words spilled into the night. Country preened about in triumph, pausing when he glanced in Desmond's direction. They couldn't have been seen, Desmond knew this, but Country dismissed his guests. Once they had departed, he waved Desmond over.

"Come on out, you walk foot buckra." Country's languid drawl hid a welcoming smirk. "Who's the pickney?"

"That's . . . a long story. Colonel's people are looking for us."

"You'll be fine for now." Country studied Lij. Suddenly the man knelt, stopping short of genuflecting. "*When God comes, the sun will come out.* Come on."

The first time Desmond met Country, he was in *myal*. A spirit possessed him and he climbed a coconut tree upside down. He looked like Br'er 'Nansi himself atop a mound of eggs the way he hung from the tree. The final rite of becoming a Niyabingi was to receive the blessing of an obeah man. Country had hammered out an ancient staccato beat on goat skin during Desmond's ceremony. A Coromantee war dance rhythm, a prayer on a hand drum to bring destruction on their enemies.

Desmond ushered Lij inside, peeking out the door for unwanted eyes one last time before shutting it. The house was little more than planks of wood hammered into place. A lizard scurried along a brightly colored relief map of Africa. A five-pointed Judaic-Rastafarian Star of David marked the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Next to the map were photographs of Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey, a so-called Negro agitator from America. A half dozen brooms sat bundled in the corner. Sometimes Country sold them, symbols of the need to sweep out the filth of Babylon, for extra money for chiba. Otherwise, he maintained his vow of poverty. The Bobo Ashanti sect lived sparse and uncompromising lives.

"You hungry? I'm fixing enough to make belly bust." Country fussed about in his kitchen, frying plantains and boiling green bananas to accompany the tripe with garlic.

"Bananas? You know crop theft is punishable by flogging with a tamarind switch."

"Eat your jokes and starve, then. What's going on?" Country poured condensed milk into his instant coffee and drank in huge gulps as Desmond relayed the colonel's plan. He issued a sideways glance at the boy, unable to hide his fear and awe.

"You read me up?" Desmond asked when he finished his tale.

"Do not let the science fool you. I am foundated with Christ." Country rocked back in his chair while he thought. "The boy himself doesn't matter. The idea of him does."

"So you believe the colonel's story?"

"That man is a ginnel. Utterly mendacious . . . a damn liard. Desperate to prove to himself that he was more than the little imp parading as a man trying to drive fear into people. Him is too hard aise, but . . ."

"But what?" Desmond asked.

"The boy is a steppin' razor. He too dangerous, like a walking blade."

"But he's my charge now. The gift of His Imperial Majesty was to allow me to recognize myself as a person. Like him, born, prepared, and guided for a purpose. This boy would be a pawn of Malcolm, used for his own ends until he was twisted into a 'mawga dog.' He deserves something better. A chance to be the man he was meant to be."

"Then free the boy, nuh? Don't let him be caught up in politricks."

"Can you get us to the coast? From there we can make our way to the United States. No one will think to look for us in the heart of the beast."

"I'll need gas money."

"Mawfa foot Rasta."

Desmond pressed a few nanny notes into his palm. Country flattened them on his knee, then held them to his eyelids for a moment.

"Money is eyesight." Country winked, then slipped the bills into his pocket. "I'm feeling a mite bit murderous."

"Good. That may come in handy."

Desmond found himself reaching for handholds that weren't there as Country's mechanical contraption careened along the curves of the road. The engine huffed, belching steam while cylinders clattered. A hot, oily smell came from the engine. Not built for creature comforts, the van was little more than a brass shell with a seat for Country. The rest was open space designed for hauling the equipment for his *passa-passas*. It shuddered as he tailgated the vehicle in front of them like a frothing bully, honking and jerking the wheel back and forth.

Their clothes folded in neat piles within their knapsacks, Desmond and Lij dressed no different than any other laborer. They looked like they were on their way to one of Country's street parties except that he still toted his cane rather than a machete. Taking a back trail, they drove toward the Kingston megapolis, bypassing the Kings' houses of its outer boundaries.

Their destination was the Port Royal citadel at the seaward end. It was largely a historical site with the remains of a burned down slave quarters largely preserved. Pirates like Captain Henry Morgan once hid there. Now, its port was a higgler's domain.

Desmond hated the voyeurs such tourist traps attracted, but the busyness of the port worked to their advantage. They'd be able to buy passage on a waiting freight and if you had enough nanny notes, you could insure no questions were asked. The amount of people milling about also decreased the likelihood of being noticed. Even if they were, the colonel wouldn't chance so public an incident. He wouldn't want the reports of injured—or worse, killed—visitors to damage their tourist trade.

"Big you up nice. Make you ever ready for love." Street vendors cried out, peddling "front-end lifters," obeah "science" for the passing consumer. Their culture bought and sold as trinkets in the shadow of the old slave depot. With the instinct of a fox beset by hounds, Desmond had the unmistakable sensation of being watched. He scanned the crowd for any of the colonel's guard or anyone who took an inordinate interest in them. He waved an all clear to Country.

Country led them down a forgotten pathway overgrown with brush, the remains of the steps little more than a scree of pebbles. He said he knew of a back way into the port, bypassing the security check points. Desmond steadied himself as best he could, using his cane to guide his slide, for he slid more than walked, especially in his Spat boots. He slung his jacket over his other arm, to relieve his heat and sweep away intruding branches. Sweat ringed his shirt's collar and drenched his armpits.

"You make my job all the more easy, wayward travelers."

"Who's there?" Desmond asked. Country froze where he stood, scanning about for the source of the voice, but Lij inched to Desmond's side.

"One brief dance in the colonel's garden and I'm so quickly forgotten?" With a queer lilting resonance to his words, a man stepped out of the shadows. His severe, pinched face, under the high arch of his eyebrows, produced an unpleasant countenance. Desmond knew the gaunt figure had deceptive strength.

The man clutched a pistol. Energy crackled within a glass sphere where the cylinder should be. The technology was reminiscent of the colonel's dynamos.

"I thought I'd bring a pistol to the knife fight this time."

"Who is this *fool-fool raasclaat*?" Country demanded.

"I'm guessing a Kabbalist agent. He was after the colonel's . . . method of production. We don't have anything you need here."

"I need young squire, Lij. We have big plans, the least of which being to depriving the colonel of him. Our men watched the colonel's palace and the Cobenas'. I've been trailing you ever since you absconded with the lad. Since you've already done half of my job, I'll just relieve you of him. Give me no trouble, you'll have my thanks and your lives."

"I am honor bound to the lad. I shall not see him harmed."

"You do me an injustice, sir. I've no wish to harm children."

"Can your employers make the same claim?" Desmond asked.

"You two chat too much," Country said. "Darkness never overcome light yet and the wicked never sow no good seed what ripe yet."

Country charged the man. The Kabbalist drew careful aim and fired into Country's path. The energy discharge erupted the earth at his feet. Country dove into the bushes for cover. Desmond and the boy skittered deeper into the depot.

The area of the depot had long been abandoned. The Maroon loved their monuments and the abandoned fort was a massive one. Its ground was hallowed to the point that most avoided even its shadow. Its shape was that of a large, squat turret, stones cast into place of the cylinder structure. The mortar cracked and broke, freeing the occasional stone. Ruins exploded around them as they ran. Energy blasts shattered stone and board alike. Chains rattled along the wall, testimony of a bygone age. Desmond pushed Lij into an open stall. The iron door's hinges were rusted and would likely creak. He didn't want to chance closing it.

"I'll be right back," Desmond said.

"You promise?"

"I . . . yes. I promise." He hoped that he hadn't exposed Lij to too much life this day and that there was room for fancy and hope. Desmond squeezed the child's hand and scrambled away before the agent neared enough to spy them.

"Come out, come out wherever you are. Don't you tire of these childish games?"

"Your first plan failed. Getting samples of the colonel's work?" Desmond hoped to wrong foot this *obroni*, letting him track the sound of his voice away from Lij.

"If we couldn't have the product, perhaps we could . . . reverse engineer the process."

Reverse engineering had a fatal ring to it. In the end, all of them—the colonel, the Niyabingi, the Kabbalists, Albion—wanted the same things: money and power, fueled by greed.

The agent fired again, wildly into the dark. The perpetual knot of Desmond's belly sprang from the fear that the man might accidentally wound the boy. Desmond ducked behind a ruined stack of wall, occasionally revealing just enough of himself to keep the assassin's attention.

Glancing over, he spied Country. He pointed to himself and made a circling motion. Country looked confused. Desmond raised ten fingers and hoped Country understood that he'd need a distraction in ten seconds. Desmond crept around, counting to himself. At "ten," Country leapt into the clearing.

"You unbaptized *bomboclaat*," Country yelled.

The Kabbalist drew a bead on Country, this time not aiming at his feet. Desmond leapt out of the shadows and landed about the shoulders of the agent. They wrestled; the agent attempted to shrug him off. Desmond held on, his limbs flailing while the

man wrenched about. Desmond gripped the man's cloak, losing purchase as it tore from him. The cloak slid to the ground, revealing the twisted body of a clockwork assassin. His right arm and both legs gleamed grey in the wan light. The fine gears of his lower torso rotated with precision. Without the muffling of the cloak, the hiss of oiled pistons and clanking gears filled Desmond's ears. Part automaton, definitely Albion in construction, Desmond had heard tell of them. But he thought the reports of them and the mechanical men whose brains floated in glass jars the stuff of children's fancy.

Country grabbed a board and slammed it into the mechanical Kabbalist. The board splintered like so much rotted driftwood. Country struck again, but the agent's mechanical arm battered him into the next stall.

Desmond thrust his cane into the clocklike workings of the man's torso, the gears grinding to a halt. The mechanical man cursed the air blue, firing wildly with his good hand. A blast seared Desmond's side. He fell onto his wounded side with a thud. The agent rolled atop him, clamping his hands around Desmond's throat. Desmond's eyes bulged, his breath escaping in a wet rasp. His hands scrabbled about in desperation. He found a loose stone from the depot wall and slammed it into the side of the Kabbalist's skull. The man slumped on top of him.

Desmond untangled himself from the man's limbs, then dusted himself off. Strolling over to Country, he lowered his hand to help him up.

"You mad?"

"You live until you die," Country said. "And dead's dead."

Desmond and Lij slipped through the dirigible dock's back entrance, mixing into the milling crowd without any fuss. Airship rope crews prepped the great machines for departure, scurrying about wrangling the floating craft like an errant bull. Their officers greeted their passengers.

"Boarding pass?"

"For two." Desmond pressed a wad of nannies into the man's hand.

"Watch your step," the officer said.

Thrumming engines soon filled his ears. Desmond leaned against the steel grey seat. As the ship rose, he stared out his window. The mountain tops of his island home seemed so small now. The truth of Lij would open his people's eyes and shake the foundations of who they were. He watched the boy sleep, his small hand still slid into Desmond's. In America, they would be far from the reach of Malcolm and the Rastafarians; the Niyabingi and the obeahists; and the Kabbalists would not think to look for them from within their belly. Lij would not be another innocent to be used and discarded without a say in the matter. For now, Desmond prayed for the opportunity to live their own lives for a moment.

Whatever may come, he thought, he would comfort his people wherever he found them. ❍

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NEXT ISSUE

MARCH ISSUE

Two masterful science fiction writers, **Mike Resnick** and **Ken Liu,** combine their formidable talent to bring us the March 2014 lead story. While transitioning to their new life on a space station, an older couple whose past has included some very hard choices find that "The Plantimal" may not make their new decisions any easier.

ALSO IN MARCH

2012 Nebula and World-Fantasy Award nominee **Cat Rambo** returns to our pages with a brutal tale about a woman whose life is coming undone amid "All the Pretty Little Mermaids"; in **Peter Wood's** first story for *Asimov's,* an inventor stops for a moment out of time to watch the first crewed Marslanding on TV and have a "Drink in a Small Town"; **Jay O'Connell** takes a look at rough justice in "Solomon's Little Sister"; **Dominica Phetteplace's** malfunctioning "Through Portal" produces terrifying consequences; new *Asimov's* author **Sean Monaghan** reveals the desperate measures a brother will take to give his troubled sister "Walking Gear"; another new *Asimov's* author, **Genevieve Williams,** sets a commanding pace in her tale of "The Redemption of Kip Banjeree, and the Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning *Asimov's* stalwart **James Patrick Kelly** composes a modern "Declaration."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's Reflections demonstrates why the passion and violence aroused by some of today's teams and sporting events tend to pale when compared to Byzantium's sixth century "Blues and Greens"; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net gives us the "Good (and Bad) News from Outer Space"; plus we'll have **Paul DiFilippo's** On Books and an array of poetry that you're sure to enjoy! Look for our March issue on sale at newsstands on January 21, 2014. Or subscribe to *Asimov's* (in paper format or in downloadable varieties) by visiting us online at *www.asimovs.com.* We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader, *Zinio.com,* and from *magzter.com/magazines!*

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

GHOST SPIN
By Chris Moriarty
Spectra, $16.00 (tp)
ISBN: 978-0-553-38694-9

This concluding volume of Moriarty's "Spin" trilogy blends space opera with cyberpunk elements (the other volumes are *Spin State* and *Spin Control*). The trilogy portrays a future where a significant fraction of the population is most accurately described as "cyborgs." One of them is Catherine Li, who in the previous books solved a series of murders—which of course have much wider implications—while teamed with a powerful AI known as Cohen. Actually, "teamed" is too neutral a term—the two are effectively married.

This third book starts with a bang, as Cohen, on a mysterious mission to a gritty industrial world, New Allegheny, blows his own brains out one step ahead of being taken prisoner by the local authorities. But there's a catch—he's leaving behind fragments of his identity that are going to cause more trouble than he himself could have caused had he been left alone. When Li takes off to discover what really happened, the trouble gets worse.

There are complications, of course, many growing out of their previous careers. For one, Li is considered a war criminal in some circles. For another, the stations that make FTL travel possible are starting to break down. Li is forced to risk being "scattershot" to the colony where Cohen died—transformed to data and sent out for anyone to pick up—and, as it happens, several people do so. One copy ends up at New Allegheny, where she gets involved with a policeman investigating a string of murders that appear related to Cohen's death. Another is revived aboard a spaceship that is taken by pirates led by a former naval officer, William Llwelleyn—who, as it turns out, has got a version of Cohen in his head, having acquired him as a navigation AI. And not surprisingly, both of them end up trying to recreate the Cohen they knew from the fragments they find.

With numerous copies of the two main characters in play at once, the plot takes on an unusual degree of complexity, aided by the fact that Moriarty is interested in pushing the shaky boundaries between the computer-assisted human and the emergent AI. To raise the stakes even more, Cohen isn't the only computer intelligence in play here. Llwelleyn is haunted by Ada, the half-mad AI running the naval vessel that he formerly commanded—and that is now hunting him across the spaceways, under the command of his former first officer. But an even bigger AI awaits them all, a massive alien "data-trap" that seems to exist in more than one universe—and that may hold the key to Cohen's ultimate design.

Moriarty is having fun with big ideas—such as Universal Turing Machines and the point at which AIs become "people"—which were among the main pleasures of space opera, even in the days of Doc Smith and his compatriots. The genre is even brainier these days. There are points at which the novel's physics or astronomy seems to be made up out of whole cloth—but nobody, maybe not even the scientists working on it, really understands this stuff. So it's not surprising she resorts to some smoke and mirrors to explain her version of FTL travel; everybody else in the field has to do pretty much the same, given that the smart money still says you can't get anywhere faster than the speed of light. She also shades into mystical territory as she nears the end, pretty much a time-honored response to the deeper waters of

quantum physics and cosmology, from Smith to Arthur C. Clarke and beyond.

But she more than compensates with the ability to turn a smart phrase, and a canny perception for human relationships—often weak points in space opera. The entire trilogy is well worth picking up, if you enjoy big-screen adventures with well-drawn characters and mind-stretching ideas.

THE BEST OF CONNIE WILLIS
Award Winning Stories
By Connie Willis
Del Rey, $27 (hc)
ISBN: 978-0-345-5406405

During the first Nebula Awards ceremony I attended, someone at my table looked at the list of finalists, which had a Connie Willis story in all three short fiction categories. They said, "It's a good thing she doesn't write novels, or she'd win that one, too." They were just a tad premature; when she got around to publishing novels, she quickly added a few more awards to her trophy shelf.

So the subtitle here is no exaggeration; every one of these stories won a Hugo, a Nebula, or both. And, as readers of *Asimov's* know, Willis covers the emotional gamut from wildly funny to deeply poignant, all the while keeping an eye on important social issues, particularly those related to gender expectations. An introduction tells about her own discovery of the genre, tipping her hat tothe wonderful writers who brought her into the field—and taught her, by their example, how to write it.

"A Letter from the Clearys" starts in a matter-of-fact way with a girl, Lynn, and her dog Stitch doing errands in town. Details slowly accumulate to give the picture of a world not quite as mundane as the opening scene suggested. The family is doing a sort of subsistence farming, without much luck, and the girl's father is worried about her leaving tracks as she returns from town. Willis deploys more details and the reader slowly comes to see the pattern they describe—which becomes clearer as Lynn reads the letter, which she's found in the post office, to her family, and even clearer in their reactions to it. The story is as good an example as you could want of Willis's trademark ability to use the trappings of everyday life as we know it to create a far stranger—and in this case, much more chilling—reality.

With "At the Rialto," Willis takes a radical change of direction—a screwball comedy set at a quantum physics conference in Hollywood. The semi-random conversations of the characters—especially the airhead hotel desk clerk, Tiffany—seem to be entangled in the same quantum uncertainties that the scientists are studying. Willis plays cleverly with the trope. Her protagonist—Ruth Baringer, one of the physicists—lapses into physics metaphors to explain mishaps with luggage. She spends much of the story trying to dodge a fellow physicist, David, who

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wants to see the Hollywood sights instead of the conference events, and who insists that the sights are actually good examples of quantum theory. Logic gets left behind early, and the story wends its way to—what else?—a happy ending.

Those are just two of the choice items on display here. There's "Fire Watch," a time travel story partially set during the London Blitz, which served as the seed for three of Willis's later novels. There's "Death on the Nile," which comes as close to horror as Willis gets—with allusions to Agatha Christie along the way to the final descent into the dark. "All Seated on the Ground" is a Christmas story, with aliens. "Even the Queen" is a story about a future in which some of what are politely called "female problems" have been solved—but not everybody's happy about that.

In addition to the stories, the volume includes afterwords to each of them, mostly explaining the inspiration for the tales. Also, there are three speeches: her Guest of Honor speech from the 2006 Worldcon; her acceptance speech when she was chosen as Grand Master by SFWA, and an alternate version of that speech, which appears here for the first time. All show her trademark wit and her love for the field and the people in it, and in an important way, they show the personal side of Connie Willis. They're worth the price of the book even if you've long since read all the stories. And if you haven't, you've a real treat waiting for you.

This one is absolutely essential to any collection of modern SF.

THE BREAD WE EAT IN DREAMS
By Catherynne M. Valente
Subterranean, $40 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-59606-582-6

Valente, who has half-seriously described her folklore-heavy fiction as "mythpunk," offers a collection of short fiction and poetry covering a variety of styles and themes. A lot of them have a playful combination of the literal and mythological—introducing the characters of the ancient tales, with all their magical attributes, into the everyday world we inhabit.

Take the opening tale, "The Consultant." It's told in a hardboiled private eye voice straight out of Dashiell Hammett, except the first-person narrator is a woman. In another, unexpected direction, the story takes a sly look at the archetypes and patterns of the folklore it draws on. The scene is perfectly set for what follows.

"White Lines on a Green Field" starts with a high school football hero—except it's Coyote, the antihero/trickster of American Indian myth. The story is full of the ambience of small-town high school life, with its rituals and its cliques, its desperate search for the right dress to wear to homecoming and the climactic tension of the Big Game. With Coyote in charge, everything seems raised to a new magical dimension. But Bunny, the narrator, is the only one of Coyote's girlfriends who doesn't fall for the magic. Yet in the end, she's the only one who doesn't end up disappointed—perhaps because she also partakes of the Indian mythical world in which Coyote exists.

Other stories have a more transparent metaphorical layer; "How to Raise a Minotaur" takes the question of dealing with an intractable child to a more or less logical extreme, and has some fun playing with the literal and figurative results, bouncing myth against the assumptions of modern family life. "In the Future When All's Well" gives a young girl's viewpoint on a world where everyone's turning into vampires. And "The Wolves of Brooklyn" starts with a simple premise—the invasion of the borough by the wild canines—and evolves consequences, not at all the ones you might expect.

Valente's sense of humor shows in these stories, but it dominates the poems. For example, "Mouse Koan" starts with the cosmic egg of the Big Bang universe, noting all the things it includes—such as "the heat death of prime time television." "The Secret of Being a Cowboy" confides, "Most of us are girls," and "We have a dental plan." "What the Dragon Said: A Love Story" starts off with a bar joke.

Several of the stories here were previously published in magazines or online, including "The Girl Who Ruled Fairyland—For a Little While," set in the world of her three "Fairyland" novels, and "Silently—and Very Fast," which was nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula. If you're just catching up with Valente, a fair number of her books and stories are available either in paperback or in e-editions—or even free online. But for those already familiar with her work who want a permanent addition to their collections, this deluxe hardcover should be just the right speed.

EIGHT MILLION GODS
By Wen Spencer
Baen, $25.00 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-4516-3898-1

Here's a stand-alone novel about Nikki Delany, a young writer with obsessive compulsive disorder, who finds herself in the middle of Japanese mythology come to life.

The novel starts with a policeman banging on her apartment door, accompanied by her mother, who (as it turns out) is convinced she belongs in a mental hospital. Since her mother is a U.S. Senator, the policeman is at first inclined to take her seriously. But with some clever moves, Nikki manages to escape—and heads straight for Japan, where her high school friend, Miriam, starts her on the process of acculturation. Miriam has been in Japan a few months longer, and can give Nikki a few pointers on the society, but basically neither one of them has much chance of fitting in.

That becomes evident when the two women start talking about one of Nikki's novels and draw the attention of the local police, who think the plot wrinkle Nikki's just told Miriam about is an actual murder. She tries to convince them—not helped by the language barrier—that it's all just a story, only to learn there's been a real murder that eerily matches the details of the one she made up. And since she's talked about it all on her blog, some crazy fan could have read it and put the idea into action.

Freed from custody after Miriam alerts the American consulate, Nikki starts writing to exorcise her compulsion—and to try making progress on the novel she's been working on. (She's under contract for a romance, but she somehow feels compelled to kill off her romantic leads.)

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Then she starts wondering just how closely her supposed crazy fan actually followed her scenario for the murder. She goes to the murdered man's building, and discovers that too many details of the real murder match her fictional scenario—and panic sets in. Has the crazy fan hacked her computer to get the details? Is he following her? She's preparing to flee the city—and then the real nature of her problem reveals itself.

Nikki has drawn the attention of a tanuki, a raccoon-like shapeshifter out of Japanese myth. Next thing she knows, a minor Japanese god—Atsumori, who appears to her as a teenage boy—takes her under his protection, and explains what has been happening. Nikki is an oracle, and what she writes is true.

In Atsumori's company—not entirely at her own free will, because he has the power to take over her body to go where he needs to—Nikki sets off on an adventure that ultimately involves many more gods, demons and tanuki, the yakuza, and various allies she has met through her interest in anime and manga (two interests she shares with Spencer herself). Also, a character named Scary Cat Dude she created in hopes of a romantic hero is tracking her . . . a problem of a different sort, especially after he too turns out to be real. And just in case we've forgotten the opening scene, her mom from Hell shows up determined to put Nikki in a mental hospital once and for all.

Spencer is a good storyteller, with a knack for pulling interesting plot surprises out of left field (a task made somewhat easier by her choice of setting). But Japan and its culture have also made a significant impact on our mainstream culture, accelerated in recent decades by the popularity of Japanese media. So while some readers will find a touch of the exotic in her Japanese folklore and setting, others will find it pleasantly familiar. And many will consider it a welcome break from the standard monsters of much current SF—not everyone wants every book filled with vampires and zombies.

A well-paced story with interesting characters and setting—give it a look if you're in the mood for something a little different.

THE GIST
By Michael Marshall Smith
Translated by Benoit Domis
Retranslated by Nicholas Royle
Subterranean, $35 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-59606-561-1

Here's an interesting experiment: a story written in English by one author, translated into French by another, and back into English by a third—who has not seen the first author's original text or communicated with him about it other than to agree to the project. What makes the project so interesting is that the story itself is about a translator faced with an apparently untranslatable text.

The story, which runs to about twenty pages in the original version, opens with the narrator, John, meeting one of his clients—a London-based rare book dealer named Portnoy. John begins by refusing the assignment he's being offered, in part because Portnoy owes him money. Portnoy—apparently reluctantly—writes out a check for 750 pounds for three older jobs, and then offers John 1,000 pounds to take on the new project, upping the ante to 1,200 almost before John has time to react.

John protests that the job is impossible—the text is either a fake or nonsense. He can read an impressive number of languages: the usual French, Spanish, Russian, German, plus more obscure ones like Basque, and some no longer extant, such as Lange d'oc. All come easily to him—though he has a strange block against speaking any of them. Because of this gift, he ekes out a living as a translator, living in a shabby apartment lined with reference books and little else. But Portnoy's offer will pay his rent for months and buy him a much-needed new computer. And the dealer appears to be willing to accept "the gist" of the story in lieu of a more exact translation. John takes the book and heads home.

Instead of sticking to the project, he

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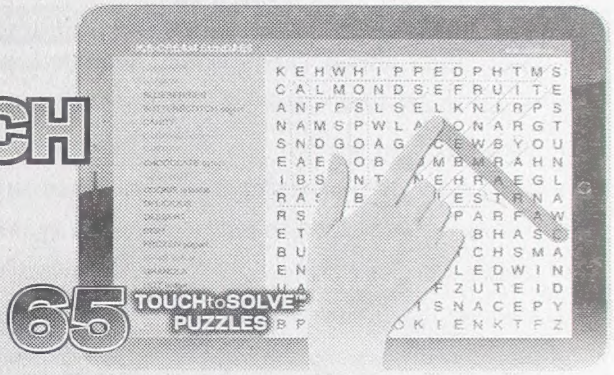

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spends much of the next week getting drunk in pubs. The bartender—and others—tells him he has been muttering something incomprehensible. He has blackouts, and he's developing a nasty cough. And he finds himself getting false memories. The story has a twist ending that deserves not to be spilled here, other than to say it's also about translation—in a somewhat different sense, and that the story would have been a good fit for a genre magazine.

The appearance of the story in three versions—original English, French translation, and translation back into English—adds an interesting twist to the project. I've undoubtedly missed things due to my rusty French, last regularly used in grad school. But you don't really need to read French to enjoy "The Gist." There's a good deal of interest and pleasure comparing the two English versions.

Smith's initial version is informal and slangy, with some characters using nonstandard grammar. He also drops in the occasional odd word like "eldritch" or tricky metaphor, giving Domis some interesting challenges. One of the top translators of English-language horror fiction into French, Domis does what appears to be a smooth job, finding equivalents for Smith's quirky idioms and giving his narrator a similarly shabby feel, though some of the odder vocabulary, like "eldritch," is dropped for lack of an exact equivalent. And the story ends up a touch longer in French.

In the retranslation by Royle, himself a well-received novelist, some of the fine points of the original are lost. For example, John's sometime girlfriend Cass now speaks more grammatically, and thus seems a bit more refined. John's language is somewhat less quirky, too, and he seems a bit wordier—though the story as a whole is actually a bit shorter. But the overall plot—the gist—comes through admirably. And that, of course, is the point of the exercise.

Anyone interested in linguistics will find this one intriguing—especially anyone who reads French fluently. ❍

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The sites for the 2014 North American SF con, and the 2015 World SF Con, have been set. While you enjoy the holidays, here's a look at what's coming up in the first few months of next year. See you at Arisia? Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of our con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me a SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

DECEMBER 2013

27–29—**IkkiCon.** For info, write: **10 Hill St., #22-L, Newark NJ 07102.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). **(Web) ikkicon.com. (E-mail) info@ikkicon.com.** Con will be held in: Austin TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton. Guests will include: none announced. Japanese animation and popular culture convention.

JANUARY 2014

9–12—**DarkCon, 8726 N. 48th Ave., Glendale AZ 85302. darkcon2014.com.** Airport Marriott, Phoenix AZ. General SF/fantasy convention.

10–12—**IllogiCon. illogicon.com.** Embassy Suites RTP, Raleigh/Durham NC. Authors Mary Robinette Kowal and Lawrence M. Schoen.

10–12—**Anime Los Angeles. animelosangeles.org.** LAX Marriott. Neil Nadelman, Aimee Major, Parlé Productions, Tadao Tomomatsu.

17–19—**RustyCon, Box 27075, Seattle WA 98165. rustycon.com.** SeaTac Marriott. T. McCaffrey. R. Bliss, A. J. Adams, S. Woehrle.

17–19—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. confusionsf.org.** Dearborn MI. C. Priest, K. Armstrong, J. Carey, R. Morris.

17–19—**MarsCon. marscon.net.** Crowne Plaza Ft. Magruder, Williamsburg VA. Jim C. Hines, C. Ryan, Mark Rogers, Cathy Doyle.

17–20—**Arisia, Box 391596, Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org.** Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. T. Huff, Lubov. Thousands attend.

18–19—**SwampCon. www.facebook.com/swampcon.** J. Wayne Reitz Center, U. of FL, Gainesville FL. "SwampCon Rising! Zombies, Ghouls, Etc."

24–26—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. chattacon.org.** Choo Choo Hotel. General SF and fantasy convention.

24–26—**ConFlikt, Box 30113, Seattle WA 98113. conflikt.org.** Seattle WA. A. McNally, T. Griffin, S. Larson. SF/fantasy folksinging.

FEBRUARY 2014

6–9—**CapriCon, 126 W. Wing #244, Arlington Hts. IL 60004. capricon.org.** Wheeling (Chicago) IL. S. M. & J. Stirling, Tom Peters.

7–17—**SF Film Festival. bostonsci-fi.com.** Somerville Theatre, Somerville (Boston) MA. Science fiction, fantasy and horror films.

14–16—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. boskone.org.** Boston MA. S. McGuire (Mira Grant), D. Palumbo.

14–16—**RadCon, Box 370, 1761 Geo. Washington Way, Richland WA 99354. radcon.org.** Red Lion, Pasco WA. General SF/fantasy.

14–16—**FarPoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. farpointcon.com.** Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Phil LaMarr. Media SF/fantasy.

14–16—**AnachroCon. anachrocon.com.** Marriott Perimeter Center, Atlanta GA. Lawrence M. Schoen, Lee Martindale, many others.

14–16—**KatsuCon. katsucon.org.** Gaylord Resort, National Harbor MD (near DC). Voice actors Ellyn Stern and Richard Epcar. Anime.

21–23—**MystiCon, 3735 Franklin Rd. SW #228, Roanoke VA 24014. mysticon-va.com.** M. Sirtis, T. McCaffrey, A. J. Hartley.

21–23—**ConDFW, 750 S. Main, Ste. 150, #14, Keller TX 76248. ConDFW.org.** Addison (Dallas) TX. Kevin J. Anderson, Alain Viesca.

21–23—**Potlatch, Box 103, Mt. View CA 94042. potlatch-sf.org.** San Jose CA. "Where Readers and Writers Meet." Literary focus.

21–23—**Furry Fiesta. furryfiesta.org.** Intercontinental, Dallas TX. Artist Blotch, entertainer Big Blue Fox. Anthropomorphics.

28–Mar. 2—**Ring of Fire. rofcon.com.** Virginia Beach VA. Multi-genre: SF/fantasy, anime, gaming, comics, cosplay, music, etc.

MARCH 2014

7–9—**FogCon. fogcon.org.** Marriott, Walnut Creek (San Francisco) CA. S. McGuire, T. Powers, James Tiptree Jr. (IM). Literary focus.

7–9—**OmniCon, Roaden Ctr., TN Tech U., c/o Box 5264, Cookeville TN 38505. omnicon.us.** TN Tech U., Cookeville (Memphis) TN.

21–23—**ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. condorcon.org** Town and Country, San Diego CA. Gail Carriger. SF/fantasy con.

JULY 2014

17–20—**DetCon 1, c/o Box 3199, Ann Arbor MI 48106. detcon1.org.** Detroit MI. No. American SF Con, with WorldCon abroad. $55.

AUGUST 2014

14–18—**LonCon 3, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. loncon3.org.** Docklands, London UK. The WorldCon. £105/A,C,US$170.

AUGUST 2015

19–23—**Sasquan, c/o Box 1091, Woodinville WA 98072. sasquan.org.** Spokane WA. D. Gerrold, V. McIntyre. The WorldCon. $140.

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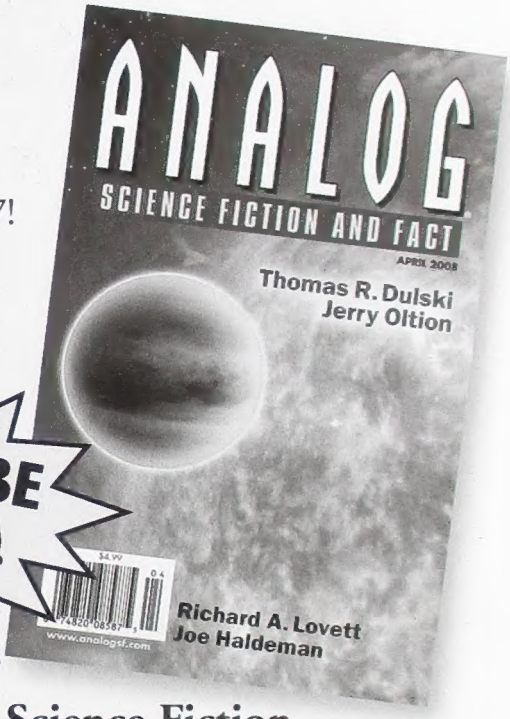

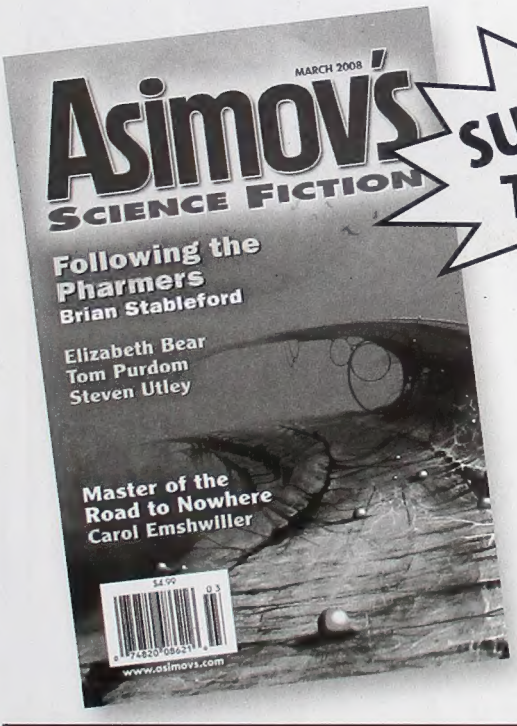

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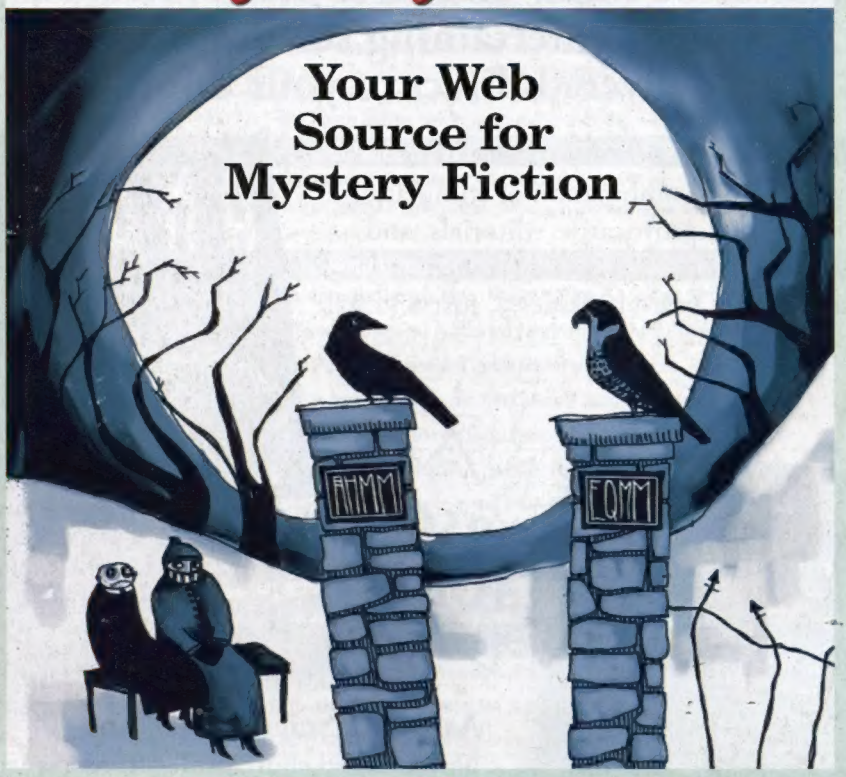

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